

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 658

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

SESSION 2017 - 2019

COMPRISING PERIOD
08 April 2019—26 April 2019

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(FORMED BY THE RT HON. THERESA MAY, MP, JUNE 2017)

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS—The Rt. Hon Jeremy Hunt, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP
LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP
LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP
MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Rt Hon. Claire Perry, MP (Minister for Energy and Clean Growth)

Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Kelly Tolhurst, MP

Andrew Stephenson, MP

The Rt Hon. Lord Henley

Cabinet Office—

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Oliver Dowden, MP

Chloe Smith, MP

Defence—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §

The Rt Hon. Mark Lancaster, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood, MP

Stuart Andrew, MP

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Margot James, MP (Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Ashton of Hyde

Michael Ellis, MP

Mims Davies, MP

Education—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Nick Gibb, MP (Minister for School Standards)

The Rt Hon. Anne Milton, MP (Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills)

Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Agnew of Oulton

Nadhim Zahawi, MP

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Robert Goodwill, MP (Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Thérèse Coffey, MP

Lord Gardiner of Kimble

David Rutley, MP §

Exiting the European Union —

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Callanan

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Robin Walker, MP

James Cleverly, MP

Kwasi Kwarteng, MP

Foreign and Commonwealth Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Duncan, MP (Minister for Europe and the Americas)

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Minister for the Commonwealth and the UN)

The Rt Hon. Mark Field, MP (Minister for Asia and the Pacific)

Harriett Baldwin, MP (Minister for Africa) §

Health and Social Care—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Stephen Hammond, MP (Minister for Health)

Caroline Dinenage, MP (Minister for Care)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Seema Kennedy, MP

Jackie Doyle-Price, MP

Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford

Home Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, MP (Minister for Immigration)

The Rt Hon. Ben Wallace, MP (Minister for Security and Economic Crime)

The Rt Hon. Nick Hurd, MP (Minister for Policing and the Fire Service and Minister for London)

Baroness Williams of Trafford (Minister for Countering Extremism and Minister for Equalities) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Victoria Atkins, MP §

Housing, Communities and Local Government—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Kit Malthouse, MP (Minister for Housing)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Jake Berry, MP

Heather Wheeler, MP

Rishi Sunak, MP

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

International Development—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Harriett Baldwin, MP §

The Rt Hon. Lord Bates

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Victoria Atkins, MP §

Baroness Williams of Trafford §

International Trade—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

George Hollingbery, MP (Minister for Trade Policy)

Baroness Fairhead (Minister for Trade and Export Promotion)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Graham Stuart, MP

Justice—

LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Rory Stewart, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lucy Frazer, QC, MP

Edward Argar, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

Law Officers—

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Cox, QC, MP

SOLICITOR GENERAL—Robert Buckland, QC, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

Leader of the House of Commons—

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AND LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL—The Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom, MP

Northern Ireland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—John Penrose, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Lord Duncan of Springbank §

Scotland Office —

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Lord Duncan of Springbank §

Transport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Jesse Norman, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Andrew Jones, MP

Baroness Sugg, CBE §

Nusrat Ghani, MP §

Treasury—

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss, MP

FINANCIAL SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Mel Stride, MP

EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Robert Jenrick, MP

ECONOMIC SECRETARY—John Glen, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Julian Smith, MP

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

Mike Freer, MP

Paul Maynard, MP

Craig Whittaker, MP

Rebecca Harris, MP

David Rutley, MP §

Jeremy Quin, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—

Nusrat Ghani, MP §

Iain Stewart, MP

Jo Churchill, MP

Amanda Milling, MP

Michelle Donelan, MP

Alister Jack, MP

Wendy Morton, MP

UK Export Finance—

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
 MINISTER FOR TRADE AND EXPORT PROMOTION—Baroness Fairhead

Wales Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

Kevin Foster, MP §

Work and Pensions

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Alok Sharma, MP (Minister for Employment)

Justin Tomlinson, MP (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Guy Opperman, MP

Baroness Buscombe

Will Quince, MP

Office of the Leader of the House of Lords

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND LORD PRIVY SEAL—The Rt. Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §

Her Majesty's Household—

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Earl Peel GCVO, DL

LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Dalhousie

MASTER OF THE HORSE—Lord Vestey KCVO

TREASURER—Christopher Pincher, MP

COMPTROLLER—Mark Spencer, MP

VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Andrew Stephenson, MP

CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Taylor of Holbeach CBE

CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Earl of Courtown

BARONESSES IN WAITING— Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Baroness Sugg CBE §, Baroness Goldie DL, Baroness Stedman-Scott DL, Baroness Manzoor CBE

LORDS IN WAITING—Viscount Younger of Leckie, The Rt Hon. Lord Young of Cookham CH

§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—The Rt. Hon. Dame Caroline Spelman, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—Bridget Phillipson, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY—Mr Charles Walker, MP

REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP

CHAIRMAN OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. John Bercow, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS

Sir David Amess, Ian Austin, Mr Adrian Bailey, Sir Henry Bellingham, Mr Clive Betts, Mr Peter Bone, Sir Graham Brady, Ms Karen Buck, Sir Christopher Chope, Sir David Crausby, Geraint Davies, Philip Davies, Ms Nadine Dorries, Mr Nigel Evans, Sir Roger Gale, Mike Gapes, The Rt Hon. Dame Cheryl Gillan, James Gray, The Rt Hon. David Hanson, Mr Philip Hollobone, Stewart Hosie, The Rt Hon. Mr George Howarth, Sir Edward Leigh, Mrs Anne Main, Steve McCabe, Siobhain McDonagh, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Albert Owen, Ian Paisley, Mark Pritchard, Mr Laurence Robertson, Andrew Rosindell, The Rt Hon. Joan Ryan, Mr Virendra Sharma, Mr Gary Streeter, Graham Stringer, Mr Charles Walker, Phil Wilson

SECRETARY—Colin Lee

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The Rt Hon. The Speaker (Chairman), Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP, Stewart Hosie, MP, The Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom, MP (Leader of the House), Dr Rima Makarem (External Member), Jane McCall (External Member), Valerie Vaz, MP, The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP

SECRETARY OF THE COMMISSION—Marianne Cwynarski

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Robert Cope

ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS ESTIMATE AUDIT COMMITTEE

Dr Rima Makarem (Chair), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, Mr Clive Betts, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP, Jane McCall, Bob Scruton

SECRETARY—John-Paul Flaherty

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD

Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Carlos Bamford (Managing Director, In-House Services), Myfanwy Barrett (Managing Director, Corporate Services and Finance Director), Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), Paul Evans (Acting Managing Director, Chamber and Committees), David Hemming (Managing Director, Strategic Estates), Eric Hepburn (Director of Security for Parliament), Tracey Jessup (Director of the Parliamentary Digital Service), Penny Young (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information, and Managing Director, Participation)

SECRETARY OF THE BOARD—Rhiannon Hollis

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY—Peter Barratt

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Kathryn Stone

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-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 658

THIRTY-THIRD VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 8 April 2019

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Local Authority Funding

1. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What financial support the Government are allocating to local authorities to help them prepare for the UK leaving the EU. [910260]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): We have made £58 million available to support local authorities' preparations for Brexit, and £20 million has already been distributed to all local authorities in England to undertake preparatory work, with another £20 million to follow. Also, £3.14 million has been allocated to 19 local authorities facing immediate impacts from ports.

Tom Brake: The Secretary of State will be aware of the Select Committee report published last week that highlighted that local authorities should have new burdens funded in full. It also highlighted the fact that port authorities such as Portsmouth needed substantially

more than the average of £136,000 that is being granted to ports. Portsmouth would need £4 million in the case of a no-deal scenario. Will the Secretary of State undertake to provide that funding and to reimburse any costs that have been spent on no deal that have proved to be unnecessary?

James Brokenshire: I note the right hon. Gentleman's approach, and I am interested in the fact that he is perhaps now interested in delivering Brexit, even though everything he has said thus far suggests that his party is trying to stop it. I take on board what he has said. This is why we have made funding available to ports such as Portsmouth, and discussions have taken place between Portsmouth and the Department for Transport. He also raised the broader issue of support for local authorities, and this is why we remain in close contact with local government and why we still have £10 million available for any immediate pressures that may emerge in the forthcoming year.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): What is all this money for?

James Brokenshire: Councils have been preparing for a range of issues. As we leave the European Union, changes to regulations might be required and training and support might be needed, as well as contingency planning so that we have a smooth transition from where we are today to leaving the European Union.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) is another mentee of the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne).

19. [910280] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with his colleagues in the Cabinet Office about supporting local authorities that are facing the prospect of running European parliamentary elections? Is it not the case that the best way to avoid all these contingencies is to have as long an extension as possible in order to have a people's vote and put the deal back to the people?

James Brokenshire: I am interested to hear that response from the Scottish National party. I hope that it will be able to guarantee that all moneys that have been given to Scotland are actually being spent on Brexit preparations. As I understand it, no guarantees on funding have been given to councils. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has been in contact with the Electoral Commission in relation to those preparations, but I hope that we will be able to avoid holding European elections.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I hear what the Secretary of State says, but when I talk to my local councils, they seem to have an endless stream of directives coming from the centre but very little guidance as to what to do if significant numbers of their staff suddenly decide to go. What contingency preparations are the Government making to support local councils in the care sector, for instance, if those people suddenly are not here next week?

James Brokenshire: I hope I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance in relation to the regular and detailed contact we have had with local councils through the ministerial delivery board, which I chair, and through representatives of local government. We also have regular contact with the nine chief executives around the country. We are giving clear advice to assure EU workers of their ability to stay and information on the settled status scheme that the Home Office has put together.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Cabinet Secretary Michael Russell MSP has confirmed that moneys allocated to Scotland through Barnett consequential have been distributed primarily to meet the costs of work already being done by local government in Scotland. The Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has said that the UK Government are not giving sufficient support to local government for Brexit. As the chaos of Brexit unfolds and local government continues to identify need, can the Secretary of State confirm whether Westminster will bring forward new moneys to meet that need, because the £10 million that he has mentioned is but a drop in the ocean? Local government and the Scottish Government should not be left out of pocket by the UK Tory Government's incompetence.

James Brokenshire: I am sorry—the hon. Lady has I think set out a request for further funding, but my understanding is only £27 million of the initial £37 million allocated to Scotland was spent, and that none was given to councils. Perhaps she can clarify the priority and intent of the SNP in Scotland to ensure that Scotland is well prepared.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State not understand the scepticism about his comments, not just from the Select Committee but from many Members on both sides of the House? After all, it was his Department that left bidding for Brexit contingency funding to the very last minute, it was his Department that diverted council funding away from some of the most deprived communities in England, and it was his botched announcement on the Stronger Towns fund that has left many of those communities feeling left behind. Can he now, without any spin or

bluster, confirm to the House whether the most deprived communities in England will see a share of the shared prosperity fund that, pound for pound, is less than, equal to or greater than the share of the European structural development fund it replaces?

James Brokenshire: Before responding to the hon. Gentleman's question, may I say how pleased I am to hear that his grandson is now recovering and returning to full health? I am sure that the whole House will cherish and treasure the fact that that young child is back on the road to recovery.

The hon. Gentleman highlights broader issues on preparation. I have already underlined the extensive work that we have done with local government. I look forward to consulting on the UK's shared prosperity fund in detail. Those allocations will be allocated and set out through the spending review. I hope even now that his community will apply for funding through the Stronger Towns fund so that it gets the support it requires.

Homes for Social Rent

2. **Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the Government's target on building homes for social rent. [910261]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Through the affordable homes programme, Homes England will deliver at least 12,500 social rented homes in areas of affordability pressure by March 2022. That is part of our £9 billion affordable homes programme, which will deliver approximately 250,000 additional affordable homes by March 2022.

Vicky Foxcroft: In Lewisham, 625 families are currently housed in temporary accommodation outside the borough, and many are at breaking point, due to having to travel for hours to get to work or school. Having had its budget cut by 60% since 2010, how does the Secretary of State expect Lewisham Council to build the housing we so desperately need?

James Brokenshire: By ensuring that the Mayor of London delivers on the £4.8 billion that has been provided to him to build 116,000 affordable homes in London. We have given the Mayor significant funding to deliver on London's housing agenda. I want to support him and see that happen. Clearly, the responsibility to do so lies with the Mayor.

17. [910278] **Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con):** Does the Secretary of State agree that Barnet Council's plan to deliver 22,000 new homes by regenerating land that has already been developed is a good way of delivering the homes we need without encroaching on the green belt or green spaces?

James Brokenshire: I certainly agree with my right hon. Friend. Focusing on land that has already been developed, and indeed on brownfield land, rather than green-belt land, will allow us to cherish our green spaces and the natural environment around us.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State will have noted that the question is specifically about social rented housing. If we are to achieve an overall target of 300,000 homes a year, does he accept that it is imperative that more than 100,000 of those have to be social rented houses, built by housing associations and councils? Lifting the housing revenue account cap is welcome, but does he accept that if we are to deliver that number of homes, the Government will have to give more financial support to councils and housing associations?

James Brokenshire: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise the £9 billion affordable homes programme, and equally the extra £2 billion that has been provided on long-term funding. He will have noted in the recent spring statement that we now have £3 billion to enable housing associations to have funding guaranteed for the delivery of those homes. I hope that he also recognises that the flexibility of the affordable homes programme allows more homes for every pound of Government investment. Clearly, I want to see more homes built, and I want to see more council homes built for social rent too.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Three years ago the Mayor of London clearly promised to build 14,000 more low-cost homes every single year, but he has never touched that target. What has gone wrong and what needs to change?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend highlights the need for the Mayor to step up to the mark and ensure that he delivers on the housing agenda in London. I recognise that delivery has increased in recent years, but the latest net additions data for 2017-18 are worrying; London demonstrates a 20% drop, compared with a 2% rise nationwide. I hope that the Mayor will focus broadly on the housing agenda. We are providing support on infrastructure and other aspects to see that London does deliver.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does not the evidence suggest that the viability assessment system is suppressing social house building and that it is unnecessary given the high profitability in the development sector?

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about viability assessments, which we addressed through the national planning policy framework—effectively the high-level planning guidebook—to provide greater certainty for councils and developers. Such assessments can slow the delivery of housing, which is why we took steps within the NPPF.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Two years ago, the Prime Minister at long last admitted that “we simply have not given enough attention to social housing”.—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 169.]

Will the Secretary of State confirm that, since the Prime Minister’s admission, his Government have recorded the two worst years for social house building in the 74 years since the second world war?

James Brokenshire: What I can confirm is that we have delivered more affordable homes over the past eight years of this Government when compared with

the last eight years of the previous Labour Government. Indeed, 407,000 affordable homes have been delivered since 2010, which is 40,000 more than the comparable period under the previous Labour Government.

John Healey: What the Secretary of State is doing is not working, which is why we have a housing crisis. One thing that he did not confirm is the hard fact that social house building has hit a record low under this Government’s watch. He told me recently that he has committed to funding only 12,500 new social rented homes over the six years to 2022, which will not even replace the homes lost through sales in the last year alone. This Government are failing on all fronts; we have a crisis with Brexit and a crisis with housing. When will the Government get serious about building the social rented homes that this country needs?

James Brokenshire: I can say categorically that this Government are serious about building the homes our country needs. Indeed, that is why we have committed funding to housing associations and given councils the flexibility to borrow to build. I challenge the right hon. Gentleman when he seeks to compare this Government’s ambition with that of the previous Labour Government. This Government have lifted the cap on council borrowing, and the number of local authority dwellings built under eight years of a Conservative-led Government is over four times the number built under the 13 years of the Labour Government.

Council Tax Increases

3. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help ensure that increases in council tax lead to improved local services. [910262]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Local authorities decide council tax levels and are responsible for managing resources to deliver services. The Government set referendum thresholds to protect voters from excessive increases in council taxes without their authorisation. Overall, this year’s settlement gives local authorities access to £46.4 billion.

Mr Sheerman: When will this ministerial team wake up to the fact that we do not all live in Maidenhead or the New Forest? The fact is that the central Government grant has been cut and cut again, and we cannot keep on getting more for less. Only this morning, Shabir Pandor, the leader of Kirklees Council, said, “Why doesn’t this Government see local government as an ally, not the enemy?”

James Brokenshire: I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman’s characterisation of the situation. I absolutely see local government as an ally, which is why I have championed its work and what it delivers for local people. I should hope that he notes that Kirklees Council will have access to £302 million in 2019-20. It is also worth highlighting that average spending power per dwelling for the 10% most deprived authorities in 2019-20 will be around 22% more than for the least deprived. It is not right to say that this Government focus on one area over another. We want local government to perform for communities across the country.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare an interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council. Despite cuts to central Government funding, Kettering council has now frozen its share of council tax all the way through to April 2020—it has been frozen since 2010—while enhancing the delivery of local public services. Does that not show that we do not need to increase council tax to improve the delivery of local public services?

James Brokenshire: I commend Kettering Borough Council for the work it is doing, and indeed Conservative councils up and down this country. It is worth highlighting that, on average, Labour councils in England impose bigger council tax increases than Conservative councils, reminding us that you always end up paying more under Labour.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Council tax has increased by a whopping 18% over the past five years, hitting families on lower incomes the hardest, taking 8% of their income compared with just 2% for higher earners. As people are asked to pay more and more for less and less, they will quite rightly look at the likes of Google with its £1.5 billion tax gap—which, by the way, is roughly the equivalent of what the current council tax increase will generate. Whose side are this Government on—hard-working families or the very, very few?

James Brokenshire: The Government are on the side of hard-working families. I remind the hon. Gentleman that under the last Labour Government band D council tax more than doubled. It is also worth highlighting that council tax in England is down 6% in real terms since the last Labour Government.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Conservative-controlled West Oxfordshire District Council has one of the lowest council tax rates in the country and some of the best services due to its innovative cost-saving measures. Does that not show that Conservative councils save money on back-office costs and provide better services for local residents?

James Brokenshire: I totally agree with my hon. Friend's message. I am sure that others outside this place will have heard it, too, as we look towards local council elections, with Conservative councils delivering more for their residents and better value for money.

Homes for Social Rent

4. **Faisal Rashid** (Warrington South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of new homes for social rent since 2010. [910263]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): Since 2010 we have delivered more than 407,000 new affordable homes. That includes more than 293,000 affordable homes for rent, of which 135,000 are for social rent. There is always more to do and I look forward to hearing from the hon. Gentleman what that might be.

Faisal Rashid: Between 2016 and 2017 a total of 138 two-bedroom properties were let in my Warrington South constituency through the social rent scheme, and about

1,100 families bid for them. What is the Minister doing to meet those unsustainable levels of demand in my constituency?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise the fact that demand in all parts of the housing market outstrips supply—social, affordable and, indeed, all ownership models that we put out there. We are putting significant resources behind all parts of the country to build the homes that the next generation needs. We have managed to get net output up from 124,000 after the crash, to 222,000. Indicators for next year are looking pretty good, too, but as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, significant resources are being applied to this problem and we will do our best to try to address it.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Minister will agree that every opportunity should be taken to increase the stock of social houses for rent, so will he acknowledge the great work of Rugby Borough Council, which is currently arranging for the replacement of old high-rise blocks with a greater number of houses on a conventional streetscape?

Kit Malthouse: I applaud any local authority that is putting its shoulder to the wheel of solving the housing crisis. A great sadness of my time as a borough councillor—I was a councillor for eight years—was the fact that the then Labour Government put an end to council house building. We were all induced, effectively, out of that business with decent homes money. We had to get rid of our housing and transfer it to housing associations or other formats. Fortunately, some councils did manage to hang on and I am very pleased that they are now doing their bit.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Some 66,000 council homes have been sold through right to buy since 2012, and just shy of 18,000 have been started—that is one replacement home started for every four sold, and they are not like for like, either. Are the Government ditching their promise for one-to-one replacement, and when are they going to come clean about that?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is quite right to point out that we have not hit our one-to-one target. That is correct—it would be foolish to deny it—but at the same time those 66,000 homes that have been sold have satisfied a legitimate aspiration among all those people to own their own home, and we are committed to that. The lifting of the housing revenue account cap was specifically designed to set councils free to build a new generation of council houses, so that in time a further generation of council house occupants can also experience home ownership.

Coastal Communities: Funding

5. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on the allocation of funding to coastal communities. [910264]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): On 23 March we announced 70 grants, worth £36 million,

from our coastal communities fund and coastal revival fund. This will mean that, by 2020, we will have invested over £200 million in coastal communities across England.

Mrs Murray: Flooding is a real threat to our coastal communities. Will my hon. Friend ensure that construction of new infrastructure in Looe is fully funded to maintain the town's economic viability and future prosperity?

Jake Berry: First, I take the opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on her recent wedding to Bob.

The Government are aware of the impact of tidal flooding in Looe. The Environment Agency and Cornwall Council are working on an integrated flood defence scheme as part of the £20 million wider regeneration of the area.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The recent House of Lords Select Committee report on the funding of coastal communities shows that our coastal towns and communities are hardest hit by austerity. Will the Minister take the report's recommendations seriously and look at how we can redistribute wealth and power from the centre and into coastal communities, especially those in the far south-west such as Plymouth?

Jake Berry: I saw the Select Committee's report with interest—in fact, I had the privilege of giving evidence to the Select Committee—and it well identifies the fact that coastal communities across the country face shared challenges. That is, of course, why we have our coastal communities fund, which is looking at individual projects that can drive jobs, growth and prosperity in coastal communities, including those of Plymouth.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Cleethorpes is benefiting considerably from the coastal communities fund and has great potential for regeneration through the Greater Grimsby town deal. Can the Minister give my constituents an assurance that he will continue to look generously towards Cleethorpes?

Jake Berry: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who is a redoubtable campaigner for his constituency. No Question Time passes without him talking about Cleethorpes, and I can say that, when considering investment in our coastal communities, I always have the biggest fish and chip shop in Britain at the forefront of my mind.

Mr Speaker: Yes, but we must not forget Bexhill and Battle either.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is always sunny on the south coast.

May I ask the Minister to consider the fact that, when people retire, they tend to move to coastal communities, which impacts on our social care and council tax bills? Will he consider long-term funding that properly looks at the age range in coastal communities? And will he also look at the radical reform of social care to make sure we have social care insurance, which would bring more money into the system?

Jake Berry: I recently visited Bexhill and Battle for a brief jaunt to the seaside with my family, so I know my hon. Friend's constituency well. We have recently confirmed that we will invest an additional £650 million in support

and care in communities such as Bexhill and Battle, and I hope he will also look at the Government's new stronger towns fund, which may be able to support his area.

Social Housing

7. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the building of social housing. [910266]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): On top of our £9 billion affordable homes programme, we have reintroduced social rent, removed the housing revenue account borrowing cap and announced £2 billion of long-term funding, and we are setting a long-term rent deal for councils and housing associations.

Kevin Hollinrake: There is currently a prohibition on the inclusion of residential properties in personal pensions such as self-invested personal pensions, which leaves potential accommodation over shops empty or unconverted. Will my hon. Friend work with his colleagues in the Treasury to reform these rules, provided that the properties are let out at a social rent?

Kit Malthouse: No one, but no one, works as hard as my hon. Friend on housing policy. There is not a time when I appear at the Dispatch Box that he does not badger me with some new idea. He obviously takes his moral duty to the next generation to build the housing they need very seriously, and I would be more than happy to walk arm in arm with him down Downing Street to No. 11 to propose exactly that idea.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): It is disappointing that the Government have scrapped their one-for-one target. My local Labour-run council, Hyndburn Borough Council, wants to build some social houses on the Clayton triangle. What support can the Minister guarantee to make sure that those social homes are built on the Clayton triangle?

Kit Malthouse: Of course, one change we have made is to allow local authorities to bid into the affordable homes programme, specifically to support their house building aspirations. We have lifted the HRA borrowing cap, so the hon. Gentleman's local authority is free, in a way that it was not before, to borrow that money. I point out to Opposition Members that one of the most debilitating parts of the debate about housing is their inability to accept that this Government and the coalition Government before us were faced with a catastrophic financial framework within which to build the homes that the next generation needs. It has taken time to recover capacity in the house building industry and in local authorities to achieve the kind of aspiration he wants to see.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I congratulate the Government on their ambitious targets, but is the Minister aware that on the Isle of Wight there is deep concern about the housing targets and the lack of affordable housing? Fewer than 100 units were built between 2015 and 2018. I hope that my council will apply for exceptional circumstances to lower its targets in the interests of our tourism economy and quality of

life, but to ensure that a much higher proportion of that is built for social housing. Will he meet me to discuss this issue further?

Kit Malthouse: I think a feeling that everybody shares across the House is the desire to address what is undoubtedly a housing crisis. Governments of all stripes over the past 30 or 40 years have failed to build the houses that the country needs. We are applying significant resources to try to correct that problem.

My hon. Friend raises an important issue, in that local authorities also have a duty to put their shoulder to the wheel to deal with the housing problem. Through the national planning policy framework, we have put the power to do so in their hands. It is perfectly possible for his local authority to produce an authoritative and ambitious local plan that both satisfies the aspirations of local residents for the kind of housing they want and sends a signal to the development community about what it should be doing on the Isle of Wight.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has advised the Government that they need to do more to support neighbourhood planning in deprived areas. Does the Minister agree that he should give additional powers to town and parish councils to facilitate that and to ensure that all areas, especially those with acute need, are able to plan for and deliver the homes, including the social housing, that they desperately need, while also improving their wider built and natural environment?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady identifies a significant intention of ours on planning policy, which is to put local communities of all types and in all parts of the country in control of planning. It is the case, unfortunately, that over the past 30 or 40 years many neighbourhoods have felt that they are victims of the planning system rather than its masters. We are keen to promote the use of neighbourhood plans in all sorts of areas—urban, rural or wherever it might be—so that local people are in control of the disposition, size, place and type of housing they want, subject to their joining us in the general mission to satisfy what is undoubtedly a huge desire in the next generation for new homes.

Homeless People: Death Rates

8. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the death rate among homeless people. [910267]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Every death of someone who is homeless is one too many, and we have a moral duty to act. We are committed to ending rough sleeping for good and aim to halve it by 2022. Our strategy, which commits us to £100 million to tackle rough sleeping, is funding more than 1,750 bed spaces and 500 new staff through the rough sleeping initiative.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for that response. An estimated 120 homeless people in the north-east have died since 2013—a staggering increase of 71%. Those 120 lives mattered and they deserve some recognition.

The Government have said that local authorities need to investigate fully the circumstances of such deaths, yet have failed to provide any funding or support to ensure that those investigations happen. Is that because people dying on our streets are not really a priority for this Government?

Mrs Wheeler: Obviously, the figures that the hon. Lady reads out are desperate and sad news. We are working with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that when a homeless person dies, a safeguarding adult review takes place, where appropriate. The safeguarding adult review process was set up not to review every death of an adult considered to require safeguarding but as a process for learning lessons where the safeguarding adults board is of the view that local partners could have done more to prevent a death resulting from abuse or neglect.

21. [910282] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her answers so far. Clearly, to prevent people from dying on our streets because they are homeless, it is far better to provide them with a home, or to prevent them becoming homeless in the first place. Will she update the House on what is being done in the Housing First trials, so that we can see that innovative scheme rolled out across the country and end homelessness for good?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Housing First pilots are in the Greater Manchester, Greater Birmingham and Greater Liverpool areas, and £38 million has been put aside to assist with them. The Mayor of the Greater Birmingham area, Andy Street, phones me regularly to tell me about the progress on the Housing First pilots in the west midlands. The pilot in Liverpool is going quite well too but, sadly, the one in Manchester is not going as well, but I like a bit of competition between the three Mayors and I am sure they will all step up.^{1 2}

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The *Hull Daily Mail* reported that in Hull alone 35 homeless people died between 2013 and 2017, part of the 24% increase in rough sleeping deaths across England and Wales in five years. That has happened on the Government's watch. Why does the Minister think that has happened?

Mrs Wheeler: Again, I say that anyone dying is a tragedy. For the hon. Lady to give those numbers is a salutary lesson on how councils need to work very hard. The rough sleeping and homelessness reduction taskforce is driving forward the implementation of our cross-government strategy to achieve our commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and to end it altogether. The latest figures, in 2018, show that the number of people sleeping rough on our streets has fallen for the first time in several years, and that the number sleeping rough in our specialist areas has reduced by 19%.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): No one wants to see people sleeping rough on our streets. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the huge teamwork going on in Cornwall across the public and private sectors? That has seen a reduction in rough sleepers by over 40% in the last year.

1. [Official Report, 9 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 2MC.]

2. [Official Report, 11 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 6MC.]

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend is a true champion for her area. The statistics in Cornwall show how this matter can be dealt with successfully when partners come together—a reduction of 40% in rough sleeping in one year alone is a true testament to the reason why we need to tackle this. We will not let it rest.

Leigh: Local Authority Funding

10. **Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of local authority funding in Leigh constituency. [910270]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The local government finance settlement for 2019-20 confirmed a real-terms increase in resources available to local authorities. I am pleased to say that the hon. Lady's own local council, Wigan, will see its core spending power increase by £4.6 million in this financial year.

Jo Platt: Under this Government, Wigan Council has seen £160 million taken from its budget—that is £160 million less to spend every single year. With children's services as a top immediate pressure, how do the Government intend to respond to my local authority when it has to deliver services to some of our most vulnerable children without the funding that is so desperately needed?

Rishi Sunak: The recent Budget provided more than £400 million for children's services but, beyond money, it is important to note that it is quality of leadership that makes the difference in providing for vulnerable children. The hon. Lady's own council recently won a prestigious award for being the best council in the country, and its leader remarked that "we are still able to give residents first class care".

Vulnerable Children: Local Authority Support

11. **Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on improving local authority support for vulnerable children. [910272]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I am working closely with colleagues at the Department for Education to ensure that local authorities can properly support vulnerable children. I recently gave evidence to the Communities and Local Government Committee together with the Children's Minister on that very topic.

Emma Hardy: As the Minister is aware, the Select Committee is doing an inquiry into children with special needs and disabilities. One of the things that comes back from all the evidence is the fact that support is often based on the resources available and not on the child's needs. Will the Minister ensure that funding for the high needs block is based on need and not on historical data?

Rishi Sunak: Responsibility for high needs funding rests with the Department for Education, but I would be more than happy to raise that point with my colleagues.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Essex County Council is set to carry a £15 million deficit for special educational needs and vulnerable children. I hear what the Minister says about working with the Department for Education, but what are it and MHCLG doing collectively to ensure that the Treasury looks at the long-term needs of the many children who are currently not funded?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. Her county council is a leader when it comes to dealing with vulnerable children; it is an example for others across the country to follow. I assure her that we are working very closely with the Department for Education. We are jointly undertaking a review to understand the exact drivers of the increased need that she mentioned, and we will make a compelling and evidence-based pitch to the Treasury come the spending review.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Minister will agree, as he said to my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), that political leadership is exactly what is needed when we look at children's services. He will therefore be as upset and aghast as me that Stoke-on-Trent City Council was rated "inadequate" in all four areas of its Ofsted inspection of children's services. The opening line of the Ofsted report said that children were not being kept safe from risk. A failure of political leadership has meant that children have been put into unnecessarily risky situations. On top of that, the leader of the Conservative group—the deputy leader of the council—has failed to attend any corporate parenting committee meetings in the past two years. Does the Minister agree that it is time for change at Stoke-on-Trent City Council? If they will not change, the electorate will do it for them.

Rishi Sunak: When we talk about vulnerable children, it is important that all councils take the precautions that are required. Of course I will listen very carefully to the findings of that Ofsted report. The Department for Education has recently made available £80 million in innovation funding. All councils can avail themselves of it to improve their practice and ensure that vulnerable children everywhere get the support and care they require.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Will Ministers support vulnerable children through to adulthood by enabling them to access integrated services through the roll-out of family hubs?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. We all recognise the value of strong families, and she champions that cause especially well. I welcome the development of family hubs. I am pleased to tell her that our troubled families programme specifically enables a family-centric approach to supporting those in need. That often involves the use of family hubs, which we encourage.

Parish Councils

12. **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support parish councils. [910273]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): We are absolutely committed to giving parish councils the tools they need to shape their communities' future.

Neighbourhood plans are giving them a real say in the future of the areas that they represent. Through the general power of competency, we have made it easier than ever for them to work on behalf of their communities. We are also making it easier for people to petition to create a local parish council if they so desire.

Antoinette Sandbach: Hankelow parish council in my constituency is facing developers seeking to avoid their responsibility to build affordable homes on the only brownfield site in the village. What powers can be given to parish councils to enable them to ensure that affordable housing development is met?

Jake Berry: My hon. Friend is an exceptional champion of the people of Eddisbury and has been extremely active on this very local issue. Local planning authorities must consult parish councils before deciding on an application. Parish councils can offer important insights, and are closely connected with the community. We have revised our approach to viability in national policy to strengthen that position.

Mr Speaker: I sincerely hope that the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) will have the Minister's tribute framed and displayed in an appropriate place in her home, for she is not merely a champion but an exceptional champion.

Housing Sector

13. **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the (a) build quality, (b) leasehold practices and (c) other elements of the performance of the housing sector. [910274]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I hope that everybody in the House wants to see new build quality improve, and we will soon consult on the details of a new homes ombudsman to make it so. We are also cracking down on unfair leasehold practices. Most recently, on 28 March, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State unveiled an industry pledge to end the doubling of ground rents, and there have been more than 40 signatures from the sector so far.

John Spellar: But the Minister surely recognises that every week there are continuing reports of shoddy workmanship, long delays in putting them right, extortionate leases, which he mentioned, and unfinished roads, lights and pavements. On top of that, we have seen unaffordable housing and eye-watering profits and bonuses. He should not just hive this off to an ombudsman; we need direct action from his Department. This scandal has been going on for far too long.

Kit Malthouse: As a constituency MP with a large amount of house building in my patch, I regularly deal with exactly the sort of problems that the right hon. Gentleman raises, and I make my views known to the house building industry about its duty to produce a high-quality product for its customers, notwithstanding whatever the Government may do. He is quite right that other tools may well be available to us, and we are looking, for example, at what we could do with the Help to Buy scheme to encourage house builders to produce greater quality. I am pleased to note, however, that the

recent Home Builders Federation star rating system has shown a general improvement, particularly among the larger house builders, with three now in the five-star zone.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I chaired the all-party group on excellence in the built environment, which recommended a new homes ombudsman, but it was October when the Government agreed to introduce one. Five months on, can I press the Minister to get a move on before he gets promoted to the Cabinet?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is quite right to point out that Housing Ministers do not last that long, and I am certainly pushing the envelope at nine months, but I will do my best in the time that remains to me to fulfil his desire, because it is an important one. If we are going to get to building 300,000 homes a year for the next generation—I know this is of particular importance to him given his background—these houses have to be fantastic, of great quality and of brilliant design, so that communities will continue to accept them in significant numbers.

Economic Growth: Midlands Engine

14. **Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to deliver economic growth through the midlands engine. [910275]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): We have confirmed up to £2 million to further the delivery of the east midlands HS2 growth strategy around Toton station. To increase business engagement, we are supporting the midlands engine's campaign to raise the region's profile nationally and internationally, and to highlight the economic potential of the midlands.

Ben Bradley: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, but local authorities in Mansfield are hoping to secure funding through the future high streets fund to help reinvigorate what was once a thriving town centre. That support would be very welcome, as would the opportunity to access the recently announced stronger towns funding. What will the criteria be for that funding, and will my right hon. Friend commit to working with our local council to give Mansfield the best possible chance of accessing it?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend rightly champions Mansfield, and we will look very closely at the expression of interest that has been expressed in relation to the future high streets fund. The stronger towns fund will support towns to grow and prosper, and we will obviously be working with communities. I can certainly give a commitment to work with him and with Mansfield as we continue to shape that, and get the right feedback to ensure that that money delivers what we want it to.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Last time I looked, Taunton Deane was a considerable distance away from the midlands, but I am in a generous mood, so we must hear the hon. Lady.

18. [910279] **Rebecca Pow:** Thank you for being so generous, Mr Speaker. Although it is not the midlands engine but the great south west, this question is about economic growth. Some £600 million of economic growth could be delivered from the £95 million forward funding, with a bid just submitted by Somerset County Council that represents great value for money in delivering 10,000 houses. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is indeed a good place for the Government to invest their money and will make a great contribution to our housing targets?

James Brokenshire: I acknowledge my hon. Friend's ingenuity in putting her question. Her council has submitted a £14 million bid to the housing infrastructure fund, which we obviously want to see delivering more homes and building the homes our country needs. I can assure my hon. Friend that we will look carefully at this bid. It is a competitive process, but I am encouraged by what she says.

Housing: Newcastle

15. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the provision of housing in Newcastle. [910276]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): Since 2010, over 21,850 new homes have been delivered in Tyne and Wear. In March, we announced over £16 million from the housing infrastructure fund, which will help to unlock a further 5,000 homes.

Chi Onwurah: I publish my constituency casework on my website, and every month since I was first elected in 2010, housing has been one of the top three issues constituents bring to me. Does the Minister agree that to deliver choice and affordability for my constituents, the right resources and powers need to be devolved to the region as part of the North of Tyne deal? We know what our housing need is.

Kit Malthouse: Given that Newcastle is one of the two mighty northern cities that made me the person I am, the hon. Lady will understand that I am keen to see that wonderful city, where I spent three fantastic years at university, achieve its aspirations. I know that the local authority has constituted a housing delivery board, and we are doing our best to give it the resources it needs to deliver housing from Ousemouth to Kenton Bank Foot to the Helix development in central Newcastle. I am certainly more than happy to help her in chivvying it on to fulfil the aspirations of the Geordies who need homes.

Homelessness: Former Armed Services Personnel

16. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the number of former armed services personnel who are homeless. [910277]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): This Government are committed to ensuring that armed services personnel do not become homeless or end up rough sleeping. We have recently allocated an additional

£1 million to support ex-members of the armed forces who are, or are at risk of becoming, homeless. That additional funding goes hand in hand with the £1.2 billion that has been set aside to tackle all forms of homelessness.

Andrew Rosindell: The Minister will be aware that too many of our brave veterans, who have served this country, have been failed in post-service life. What discussions has the Department had with the Ministry of Defence, so that clear pathways are set out to prevent homelessness in the first place? Will she give a cast-iron guarantee that the military covenant will be upheld?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend is quite right. A joined-up response is essential to ensuring that veterans can access the prevention and relief services available to them. I am pleased to say that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which was introduced by our hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), places a statutory duty on the Secretary of State for Defence to refer members of the armed forces to local authority services for tailored support, including a personalised housing plan, to prevent them from becoming homeless. Where veterans are homeless and vulnerable as a result of having served in the armed forces, local authorities have a duty to house them. I sit on the Veterans Board, and it is my pleasure to do so.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): In the United States, many former armed services personnel are housed in dedicated veterans communities run as housing co-operatives, giving them control over the cost of the housing provided to them and enabling them to live their lives in the way they want to. Will the Minister undertake to look at the potential for using housing co-operatives to house armed forces personnel here in the UK?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that innovative idea. We have already agreed some money for ports down on the south coast, where there is a predominance of naval people, who have come together to build a number of units as one group. I think this idea has legs—if not sea legs, then Army legs.

Home Ownership

22. **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of home ownership among under-45-year-olds since 2010. [910284]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): The proportion of under-45-year-olds owning their own home was 50% in 2010-11. That fell to 42% in 2016-17, in the aftermath of the crash, but happily it has since risen to 45% in 2017-18. Supported by Government schemes including Help to Buy and right to buy, the number of first-time buyers rose to more than 370,000 in 2018, an 86% increase since 2010.

Rosie Duffield: Many of my constituents are simply priced out of the housing market. Rental properties and mortgages are out of reach to all but the wealthiest, meaning that families who have lived for generations in villages such as Bridge, Chartham and Sturry, where their parents and grandparents grew up, are now simply

unable to afford a property. Will the Minister acknowledge that we urgently need realistically priced affordable homes for the next generation, especially in rural areas?

Kit Malthouse: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Well done.

Topical Questions

T1. [910285] **John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Last Wednesday, I joined the New Zealand high commissioner and other hon. Members to remember victims of the Christchurch mosque attack, reaffirming our solidarity with our Muslim brothers and sisters. As in New Zealand, our diverse communities make us stronger. That is why we will always stand up against hatred, bigotry and extremism. It is also why I have reaffirmed the Government's commitment to the holocaust memorial and learning centre next door to Parliament. I met holocaust survivors last week to set out more details of the plan for that.

On a very different note, the issue of tree netting on development sites and its impact on wild birds has caused concern across the House. That is why I have written to developers today to underline their responsibilities to protect wildlife and to ensure that netting is kept to an absolute minimum.

John Grogan: May I associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks about New Zealand? We had a similar remembrance event in Keighley only yesterday.

Will the Secretary of State carefully consider the compromise proposals for Yorkshire devolution, as put forward by the mayor of South Yorkshire, for the period to 2022? Will he also consider the request from the councils in the Leeds city region to extend their devolution deals for that period?

James Brokenshire: I will look and am looking carefully at the submissions that have been made. I want to see greater devolution across Yorkshire. I recognise Yorkshire's ambition to have those powers transferred down and I look forward to continuing discussions with the hon. Gentleman and others on how best that can be advanced.

T3. [910287] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for meeting me to discuss permitted development rights, but does he not agree that the policy has not worked? It has allowed landlords to build ghettos and London councillors to socially cleanse their most vulnerable families to places such as Harlow, yet we have not been given the resources to deal with the extra burden. Will he look at that and change the rules?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for highlighting this issue, which he and I met and discussed directly. He knows that we made a commitment in the recent spring statement to examine permitted development rights in relation to the conversion of office to residential property, but I am content to look more broadly at where the burden lies with some of these transfers, because it is important that we get this right.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): First, may I say that my thoughts are with those affected by the Clutha helicopter crash? The fatal accident inquiry is starting in Glasgow today.

The UK Government's shared prosperity fund is still something of a mystery box. We do not know how much will be in it, who is going to administer it or what its priorities will be. Will the Secretary of State commit today that the Scottish Government will get to control the fund and that Scotland will not get one penny less than we would have received under EU funding?

James Brokenshire: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady about the need to ensure that the UK shared prosperity fund works for all parts of our United Kingdom, and we will certainly work with the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations on the preparation for that and in advance of the spending review.

T4. [910288] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): New homes need new infrastructure. The housing infrastructure fund bid for Chelmsford's second railway station and bypass will unlock over 10,000 new homes, so may I urge my right hon. Friend to back the bid? Otherwise I will keep on nagging him until he does.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): We have already invested £10 million in the Chelmer Waterside development in my hon. Friend's constituency, but she is still insatiable for more Government funding for her fast-growing constituency. As she knows, HIF bids are a competitive process, but I will look carefully at the proposals put in by Chelmsford; and, given her support, let us be hopeful of success.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): New figures today show that 40,000 people are still trapped in privately owned blocks wrapped in Grenfell-style aluminium composite material cladding. That is 40,000 lives on hold—weddings cancelled, mental ill-health rife—because people are trapped in properties that cannot be sold. The Prime Minister repeatedly said that she rules nothing out, so when will the Government finally say, "Enough is enough," set up a loan fund for private blocks and get the job done?

James Brokenshire: I firmly recognise the stress, strain and anguish that so many people continue to live with as a consequence of ACM cladding on the outside of a number of these blocks. A growing list of companies, such as Barratt, Mace and Legal & General, are doing the right thing and taking responsibility. In addition, warranty providers have accepted claims on a number of buildings. I urge all owners and developers to follow the lead of those companies and step up to make sure this work is done. This is a priority for me; I know the work needs to be advanced more quickly, and I am considering all other options if it is not.

T5. [910289] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Mr Speaker, I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council. When will the Secretary of State lay the structural changes order for new unitary councils in Northamptonshire?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I thank my hon. Friend for his engagement with the process of reorganising local government in Northamptonshire. I am pleased to tell him that the Department's consultation

on this matter has now closed. The Secretary of State is considering the responses and he intends to announce his decision to the House as soon as is practical.

T2. [910286] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What steps will the Secretary of State take to support housing renewal in older industrial areas, particularly coalfields?

Kit Malthouse: As I hope the hon. Gentleman knows, we are putting enormous emphasis on the regeneration of brownfield land. It should be a first call for all local authorities trying to deliver new homes. As I recall, 56% of all new homes last year were delivered on brownfield land. Through Homes England, we are putting significant money behind remediation required in areas such as coalfields and other sites that might be contaminated. I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with details of how his area could access that funding.

T6. [910290] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May I urge the Government to support local authorities in getting tough on littering and making sure that more fines are levied for this antisocial habit?

Rishi Sunak: I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend. We very much back the recent *Daily Mail* campaign to keep our country tidy. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is responsible for increasing fines for fly-tippers. We will do our bit to ensure funding for our parks and green spaces.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): New developments have to meet the needs of local people, not developers. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the plans for York Central, which fail on transport, housing and climate credentials?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Having visited the York Central site, I know how key it is in delivering the northern powerhouse. That is why it is with the greatest pleasure that I will meet the hon. Lady.

T7. [910293] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): The south-west has fantastic economic potential and further ambitions for growth. Does the Minister recognise that the great south west is on a par with the northern powerhouse? Will he ensure we receive the same high-profile support from his Department?

Jake Berry: The application from my hon. Friend to be the high-profile supporter of the new south-western powerhouse is now complete. I look forward to working with her to ensure we provide support for her ambitions and those of the people she represents.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Online agent Rightmove continues to allow discrimination against low earners, single parents and the disabled by declaring “No DSS” on its portals. Will the Minister please take action to end this potentially unlawful practice?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): First, I thank the hon. Lady for all the hard work she put in when she was on the Opposition Front Bench and for the principled stand she has taken. It has been a pleasure working with her. Secondly, we have declared that we want all sites to take off “No DSS”-type adverts.

I have been very encouraged by what has happened with Zoopla and National Westminster bank. This work is ongoing, but I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady to see what we can do to spread it further.

T8. [910294] **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Many of our precious historic parks and gardens have been restored with vital grants from the national Heritage Lottery Fund. As a part of that, conservation management plans have had to be prepared. Unfortunately, despite Hestercombe Gardens in my constituency offering to curate the archive, the national Heritage Lottery Fund has apparently just destroyed the entire archive, apart from a few documents it thought it should keep for legal reasons. Does the Minister agree that this is a scandal that should never be allowed to happen again?

Rishi Sunak: I agree with my hon. Friend that maintaining records of the UK’s landscape heritage is important. I would be delighted to raise her point with colleagues at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to ensure that in future we can surmount any bureaucratic hurdles and that vital archives are preserved.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Further to earlier answers about the housing ombudsman scheme, there is considerable consumer scepticism that the scheme will not end up being industry-driven and will favour house developers rather than buyers. What assurances can Ministers give us that it will be consumer-led and that consumers will have input into the consultation?

James Brokenshire: I firmly recognise the consumer interest. That is what motivated me to put an ombudsman in place. I want the ombudsman to first be established in a shadow format, leading into the statutory ombudsman scheme I want to create, so we create some momentum and give a sense of confidence to consumers.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Lack of knowledge of the armed forces covenant and of joined-up working in some cases is one of the key barriers to veterans getting the help that they need. What more can we do to increase joined-up working and awareness?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend will have to excuse me for turning my back—there are not too many daggers in it today. We have been asking councils to nominate a senior councillor in every single council to be a veterans’ champion. I will audit that and ensure that it happens. The Veterans Board—the inter-ministerial Government board—meets regularly; in fact, we have our next meeting in only about three weeks’ time.¹

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Do the Government consider it fair and reasonable for devolved local authority areas to charge people living outside those areas more for exactly the same services?

Jake Berry: No, and if the hon. Gentleman writes and gives me details I will look into that.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Citizens Advice reports that local authority debt collection practices are a growing factor in those approaching it seeking help on problem debt. What can the Minister do to roll out best practice to local authorities?

1. [Official Report, 14 May 2019, Vol. 660, c. 2MC.]

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for making me aware of that point and the new advice from Citizens Advice. I have enjoyed my meetings with him, and I am pleased to tell him that we are looking at his proposals and hope to make an announcement when we reasonably can.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The Housing Minister has a make-it-so attitude. Will he therefore meet with me, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the timber industries, and the group to discuss timber's role in hitting the future carbon target as well as the housing target?

Kit Malthouse: Given the emphasis the Government are putting on new and innovative construction techniques in building the homes that the next generation needs, I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. Notwithstanding the problems we had with timber-framed buildings back in the 1980s, there is significant potential for its use in future house building.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Yes, young Hughes—Eddie Hughes.

Eddie Hughes: Thank you again, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister consider allowing local authority licensing committees to authorise the use of digital ID for the purchase of alcohol?

Rishi Sunak: We are always keen to embrace whatever technology we can to improve service to our constituents. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and look at his suggestion.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Another new young Member requiring cultivation: Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Sheerman: Thank you, Mr Speaker—very ageist, but welcome anyway. One of the worst things for people who have a house is the house next door being empty, derelict and lost. What progress are we making to identify empty, unused houses given there is such great scarcity? Is it compulsory purchases? How can we unlock these houses as a resource?

James Brokenshire: I hope to reassure the hon. Gentleman. The number of long-term empty homes is down by nearly a third since 2010, but it is important that we take further action. That is why we introduced the empty homes premium in 2013, which gives councils the option to increase the premium from 50% to 100% of nominal council tax, and we are seeing that increase this month. We acknowledge the important point he makes about empty homes.

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

Ruth Lorraine Jones, for Newport West.

Access to Medical Cannabis

3.39 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the return of medical cannabis that was seized from Emma Appleby at Southend airport on Saturday 6 April and which is needed to treat her very ill daughter Teagan's extreme epilepsy, and to take steps to make sure that medical cannabis is available for prescription around this great country.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): My sympathies go out to the patients and their families who are desperately seeking to alleviate their symptoms with medicinal cannabis. We are working hard to get the right approach. The law was changed on 1 November last year to ensure that it is now legal for doctors on the specialist register of the General Medical Council to prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use in the UK.

Whether to prescribe must remain a clinical decision to be made with the patients and their families, taking into account the best available international clinical evidence and the circumstances of each individual patient. Indeed, prescriptions have been written for the products that the family attempted to bring into the country and these have been supplied to patients. Without clinical authorisation, it is of course not possible to import controlled drugs, which is why the products were seized by Border Force on Saturday. However, we have made available the opportunity for a second opinion and the products have been held but not destroyed, as would normally be the case.

In relation to childhood epilepsy, the British Paediatric Neurology Association has issued interim clinical guidance. NHS England and the chief medical officer have made it clear that cannabis-based products can be prescribed for medicinal use in appropriate cases, but it must be for doctors to make clinical decisions in the best interest of patients, to balance the risks and benefits of any proposed treatment—including cannabis-based products—and to make a decision with patients and their families on whether or not to prescribe.

To date, research has centred on two major cannabinoids, tetrahydrocannabinol and cannabidiol. There is evidence that CBD may be beneficial in the treatment of intractable epilepsy, and over 80 children have already been supplied with CBD products in the UK on the basis of a specialist doctor's prescription. I entirely understand how important this issue is to patients and I have met and listened to families. I know just how frustrated they are. Therefore, after meeting parents, I have taken the following actions.

First, I have asked NHS England rapidly to initiate a process evaluation to address barriers to clinically appropriate prescribing. Secondly, to improve the evidence base and to get medicinal cannabis to patients in need, I have asked the National Institute for Health Research and the industry to take action to produce that evidence in a form that will support decisions about public funding. The NIHR has issued two calls for research proposals on medicinal cannabis and I look forward to the responses to those consultations. That is in addition to the training package being developed by Health Education England to provide support to clinicians to enable them to make the best decisions with their patients.

[*Matt Hancock*]

This is a very difficult area, with some heart-rending cases. I look forward to working with all Members of this House to ensure that patients get the best possible care.

Sir Mike Penning: I thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, on behalf of constituents around the country who need help from medical-prescribed cannabis, and I thank the Secretary of State for coming to meet the families and their loved ones who feel that medical cannabis on prescription may help.

Some of these young children—though we are not talking only about children—have 300 seizures a day. They are given drugs that do not seem to work at all. There is not a cure, but these medical oils can and often do reduce the number of seizures. Many colleagues in the House will know of the case of Alfie Dingley—the only young boy that has an NHS prescription for the medical use of cannabis oil. He is now a relatively naughty boy. He has learned to ride a bike. His sister has a brother she has never really experienced before.

This is not a cure, but these parents are absolutely desperate. When the Government did the right thing and changed the law, they thought the situation was going to get better. In my capacity as joint chair of the all-party parliamentary group on medical cannabis under prescription, I warned them that this was just the start of the journey, and that it would be a long one.

Anyone who saw the footage from Southend airport at the weekend—any father, any parent, anyone who has a loved one in their family who suffers—would understand what that family were trying to do. Cannabis had been prescribed by a consultant abroad because it could not be obtained in this country. Many families are relying on charity to raise the money—in some cases, £1,500 a month—to obtain it on prescription. As the Secretary of State knows, prescriptions are being issued by the relevant experts, but the clinical commissioning groups and the trusts are refusing to honour those prescriptions. It is a disgrace that that should happen in this country, and we should all be ashamed.

I welcome the trials and I welcome the review, but, sadly, people need these medicines now. Can we unlock the door? The Border Force staff at Southend airport were very polite and very helpful. They thought they were doing their duty. We should do our duty, and get that medical cannabis back to Teagan.

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend and the all-party parliamentary group for their work in bringing this issue to the attention of the House and the country, and in supporting the parents involved. My right hon. Friend has been characteristically emphatic and reasonable in providing that support, and I entirely understand his concern. Meeting some of the parents as part of the APPG delegation was a very emotional experience.

Of course the Border Force staff were doing the right thing—and I am glad that they were doing it in a reasonable way—according to the existing rules, under which if a controlled drug is to be imported it needs a licence, and the import of an unlicensed controlled drug therefore requires a prescription from a specialist doctor. There are just over 95,000 registered specialist doctors

in the UK. Any one of them who has the relevant experience can prescribe the drug, and it will be then allowed in. That can happen now. The guidance is not a barrier, and it is not a barrier to prescription. However, it is clear to me that this process is not working. I have therefore initiated a process evaluation, which is NHS language for looking at exactly why it is not working and what we need to do about it.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): It is shameful that we saw those scenes at Southend airport, and that families continue to suffer because the arrangements are so slow. It is, however, appropriate that we are discussing this issue on the day on which my hon. Friend the new Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) has taken her seat, because her predecessor, my friend Paul Flynn, was an indefatigable campaigner for many important causes, including the legalisation of cannabis for medical use.

Last year Charlotte Caldwell, the mother of another sick child, Billy Caldwell, said:

“It’s absolutely incredible, it’s amazing. The compassion and speed that the Home Secretary has moved with is just incredible.”

That is the impression that Ministers sought to give, but it was a misleading impression, as the plight of the Applebys revealed this weekend.

Is the Secretary of State aware that cannabis oil is not the same as cannabis, and that it has no psychoactive or addictive effects? Is he aware that in other jurisdictions a range of conditions qualify for treatment with cannabis oil and related products, including cancer, AIDS, muscular dystrophy, Crohn’s disease, epilepsy, Parkinson’s disease and arthritis? Is he aware that the Home Secretary has previously commissioned Sally Davies to examine the scheduling of cannabis as a whole? She reported as long ago as June 2018. Is the Secretary of State aware that Ms Davies’s report has been with the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs since that time? Is the House to understand that the Home Secretary has just been sitting on it?

What is the Secretary of State going to do to speed up the processes around this issue? Parents will not be impressed to hear of further reports or further enquiries. We need to resolve the Appleby case quickly, but we also need to make sure that no other families of sick children have to suffer in the way the Appleby family is suffering.

Matt Hancock: I did set out the answers to those questions in my initial response. There are a number of smaller active agents in medicinal cannabis, but there are two major ones: THC and CBD. The vast majority of those who now have access to medicinal cannabis have access to CBD, and that is different as an active agent. Clinicians have to make a judgment according to the personal circumstances and needs of the patient, and I am trying to remove all the barriers to those clinical decisions.

We have taken action. I absolutely understand the history here, because the Home Secretary and I signed off on the decision to allow medicinal cannabis to be available at all on 1 December, following the chief medical officer’s report. What we need to do now is ensure that there are no further barriers to prescription where a clinician judges that that is the right thing to do.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the case of my constituent Indie-Rose Clarry. She is a four-year-old girl who suffers from Dravet syndrome, a very severe form of epilepsy. Her parents, Anthony and Tannine, are also crowdfunding on the internet to raise thousands of pounds to buy drugs from Holland. That is not because they are criminals, but because they love her, they want to ease her pain and they are desperate.

On Friday, as it happens, I met Indie-Rose's consultant—not only her consultant but one of the leading specialists in the country in severe forms of child epilepsy. He made the point that there is a barrier to prescribing cannabinoids that include THC, because there is insufficient evidence in that case. Will the Secretary of State confirm that there is evidence on CBD but not THC, which Indie-Rose's parents have found has the greatest impact in reducing seizures?

Matt Hancock: Characteristically, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The clinicians consider that there is a much less evidence on THC, as opposed to CBD. I have therefore instructed the National Institute for Health Research to do the research. Doing the research will of course require some cases where the drugs can be legally tested. I had already put that in place, and I am telling the House about it today.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I am glad this urgent question has moved from the Home Office to Health, where it should be, but one has to ask why drugs are being seized when they are no longer illegal—that is what changed in November.

In medicine, we use many controlled drugs, such as heroin, morphine, ketamine and diazepam which have a street value, but that has never stopped them being used in medicine. The problem is that the way cannabis was treated for 50 years means we have had almost no research and almost no experience.

The problem is also that expectations were raised in November, as if every GP would be able simply to write a prescription, but a prescription for what? We have to have a pharmaceutical quality of drug so that we know exactly how much CBD and how much THC we would be prescribing. That is not yet generally available. It is important that we look, through the Government, to get that pharmaceutical grade licensed, with reliable formulations.

This issue is under inquiry in the Health Committee, and we have heard from patients who were advised to go to Holland to get drugs, costing them £30,000 per visit. That is unacceptable. The Government will have to stimulate research, and I am grateful that calls for research are going to go out. However, we need specialist centres in paediatric neurology for children with epilepsy, we need adult neurology for multiple sclerosis, and we need pain specialists for chronic pain.

These preparations are unlicensed; that means there has been no testing on their efficacy—whether they work—and on whether they are safe. That is quite scary for doctors, particularly as if it is an unlicensed drug, they have to sign a form to say that they accept personal liability. I can tell the House that that is quite intimidating, as I have done it myself. The Government need to push for centres of excellence to help to stimulate the research they say they are calling for. That is the only way we will

get randomised controlled trials, and get the answers that will lead to these drugs being licensed, rather than our just having a temporary fix for now.

Matt Hancock: In an outbreak of cross-party unity, I agree entirely with the hon. Lady. The approach she has taken is incredibly sensible; it is also the one that has been recommended to me by my clinical advisers. We need to ensure that we take an evidence-based, pharmaceutical-grade approach to prescription. I will take away her idea about centres of excellence, because I entirely see the point there. In the case of most drugs, it is the pharmaceutical industry that pushes for, and pays for, the randomised controlled trials. In this case, because the industry is in a different shape for other reasons, it is we who are making this happen, and we are pushing it as fast as we can.

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): I would like to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for bringing this question forward, and I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. My constituents the Levys came to see me about their daughter, Fallon, who has LGS epilepsy. Her consultant neurologist has told the family that “the actual logistics of the prescribing has not yet been worked out”.

Why is this the case, and what can be done to ensure that Fallon has access to the necessary medication as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: I should like my hon. Friend to write to me with the exact details of that case. The process for prescription by someone on the specialist register is well trodden; it is used for all sorts of unlicensed drugs, and it should be available. We are making a second opinion available to ensure that it can be brought to bear in cases such as these. I am interested in hearing about specific cases—this applies to everyone, not just to my hon. Friend—so that we can ensure that the appropriate clinical decisions can be made.

Mr Speaker: There was I thinking that the Secretary of State would be the first to congratulate the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) on his prodigious efforts and output as a Minister, but I am sure that that will come ere long.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): I warmly welcome the measures announced by the Secretary of State today, but will he go further in discussing the importance of clinical trials and answer some of the many questions about striking the right balance between THC and CBD? We have heard in the Select Committee that some pharmaceutical companies are refusing to make their products available for clinical trials. Will he look specifically at that point? We need to ensure that safe and consistent products are regularly available and that they are of a predictable pharmaceutical grade, as we have heard.

Matt Hancock: If I may, Mr Speaker, I would like to add to my previous answer by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Watford, the former Business Minister, on all that he did to support business, enterprise and the case for capitalism while he was in his former job. I regret his departing from the Government, because he was a brilliant Minister.

[*Matt Hancock*]

On the question ahead of me, so to speak, the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), is right to say that it is vital to bring forward these clinical trials, and that the pharmaceutical companies that provide the oils have not pushed forward the trials in the way that would normally happen. We have therefore stepped in to try to make them happen, but we do need the calls to be answered.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about removing barriers, but it is clear to me that the main barrier is the British Paediatric Neurology Association itself. When its president came to give evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee a couple of weeks ago, he was arrogant, he was dismissive of the families' experience, and he misled our Committee by denying that Members of this House had sought a dialogue with him, which he had refused. What is the Secretary of State going to do to remove the obstacle of the BPNA?

Matt Hancock: I am sure that the BPNA will have heard that testimony from the right hon. Gentleman. Of course, the BPNA is independent of Government, and we have to follow the clinical judgments made by the relevant organisations, whether a royal college or, as in this case, an association. What I have done is ensure that a second opinion is available, because the BPNA guidance is merely guidance; it is not absolute. A clinician on the specialist register can make a decision according to what they think is best for the patient in front of them.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Can the Secretary of State give some more detail on the time line for this very welcome review? I am sure that we all sympathise with parents such as Mrs Appleby, who is doing everything she can for her daughter.

Matt Hancock: Yes, the call for randomised control trials and the process evaluation are both being conducted very urgently by NHS England.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): There are lots of warm words circulating here today. My question relates to the point that was just made. We have this problem today, but clinical trials will take six months, nine months or a year. What can we reasonably do legally to get certified products that we know will work into the hands of parents with children who desperately need them today?

Matt Hancock: I entirely understand the hon. Gentleman's point, and I feel the same way as he does about the urgency of these cases. The need to get a second opinion can be actioned immediately, and it will be, because the crucial point is that unlicensed medicines cannot be prescribed without a clinician. There are just over 95,000 clinicians on the specialist register, and any of those who have expertise in this area can, if their clinical judgment allows, make these prescriptions. That can happen right now.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I was very supportive of the case of Alfie Dingley and the change in the law. The Secretary of State is absolutely right that this must be based on clinical decisions.

However, given that there are several hundred children suffering from severe intractable epilepsy, is not the problem that the guidance from NHS medical bodies is just too stringent? Is it true that only two NHS prescriptions have actually been issued to date? Given that Teagan Appleby has had at least a dozen prescribed drugs—I will not list them, to avoid stressing *Hansard*—as well as a nerve stimulator, what would be the downside of allowing her access to medical cannabis now?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes a good point. More than 80 prescriptions have been made, but that is for both THC and CBD. Of course, THC brings risks—the active elements within cannabis do bring risks. There are also benefits, as I have seen very clearly. It must be for a clinician to decide the balance of those risks. I have enormous sympathy for the families, having heard their personal testimony about the massive benefits for their children, who sometimes, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said, have 300 seizures a day. Having seen that and looked them in the eye, I understand the benefits. However, it has to be a clinician who makes that judgment. I am not medically qualified and cannot overrule a clinician, but there are clinicians available who can provide a second opinion, and that is what I can ensure.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for what he has said so far, but I have spoken with a neurosurgeon in my constituency who says that one of his anxieties is not being able to give good advice to parents whom he suspects might be trying to access medical cannabis through not wholly legal routes, because he is unsure what the law is. I agree with the Secretary of State on the need for clinical evidence, so what more information can he give us on the timescale? When will we see the health education research that he talks about? In the meantime, why can we not use the evidence of clinical trials conducted elsewhere?

Matt Hancock: The evidence of clinical trials from elsewhere can and should be used. All international clinical evidence should be brought to bear on such decisions and has been in the case of CBD. As for how quickly things will happen, the answer is, as the hon. Lady would imagine, as soon as possible.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The SNP spokesman was spot on. This is about not just drugs such as ketamine and diazepam, but beta blockers, which can also be extremely dangerous in the wrong hands. Will my right hon. Friend speak to the Home Secretary and say, "Look. This is a medical treatment. It shouldn't be a controlled drug as such"? This treatment should not be stopped at our borders, particularly when it appears that not enough people are prepared to prescribe it.

Matt Hancock: I spoke to the Home Secretary this morning about the issue, and we proposed to see it as a health matter, not a borders matter. The Border Force officers were merely following the rules, and the question is about whether the drug is licensed. If it is not licensed, but it is controlled, the question is about whether it has clinical sign-off. The truth is that the compound does have negative effects, so it must be a controlled drug. I do not support the legalisation of all cannabis. Unless

one supports the legalisation of cannabis in all cases, it has to be a controlled drug, which leads us to where we are. We must get the evidence of the medical and clinical benefits that the families have emphatically explained, and I want to see this situation dealt with properly.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Some reports suggest that even Alfie Dingley, whose case gave rise to the new legislation, probably would not be eligible for medicinal cannabis under the new regulations because they are so strict. The Health and Social Care Secretary says that 95,000 clinicians are ready and waiting to sign off prescriptions, but can he explain why they are not doing so? If it is as easy as that, surely they would be doing it, so what else will he do to look at the barriers?

Matt Hancock: We have ensured that all the patients who received access to medicinal cannabis on an exceptional basis before the law changed on 1 November can continue to access it. If that is not the case in any instance, I want to know about that so that we can fix it. Alfie Dingley would be eligible for these drugs if a clinician were prepared to sign off the benefits for Alfie, and such decisions must be led by clinicians. I am doing everything I can to get the evidence and second opinions in place and to ensure that the process works as well as possible. That is what I can do. What I cannot do—it would be unreasonable for any Health Secretary to do so—is overrule clinical decision making in individual cases. That would be wrong, and I do not think that any Member of this House would propose that I should do it.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): A number of us have been written to by constituents about such cases, and I have corresponded with the Secretary of State about Julie and Stuart Young, the parents of Lloyd, for example. Clinical trials have been mentioned across the House, but a piece of legislation is already in place. The Access to Medical Treatments (Innovation) Act 2016, which was sponsored by me in the Commons and by Lord Saatchi in the other place, seems ideally suited to help us through this sticky situation.

Matt Hancock: Yes, we are looking carefully at how we can use that legislation as effectively as possible. Understanding the medical consequences of any use of a drug is incredibly helpful evidence for where it should be prescribed further, and that is the thrust of the 2016 Act.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) was a good Minister, too.

Mr Speaker: Another ex-Minister to compliment. I am bit surprised by the Secretary of State. He is slipping from his usual standard. I thought that he would be busily cultivating his hon. Friend. *[Laughter.]*

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), my co-chair of the APPG on medical cannabis under prescription. The situation is, frankly, intolerable. I have spoken with all of the families requesting medicinal cannabis with THC—let us not forget the THC. I am

sure that Teagan will get a second opinion and that she is another child who will get access to medical cannabis, but what about all the others? They cannot wait. My right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) spoke truthfully about the inquiry and the evidence it has taken. The BPNA has not spoken as it should have and it has not done enough to support the families.

Mr Bradshaw: It lied.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I will not use that word, but I totally agree with my right hon. Friend. I say to the Secretary of State that this has got to stop. We cannot wait for clinical trials. There is medicine out there—get it to the children who need it.

Matt Hancock: The BPNA is going to have to answer for itself about the way in which its representatives conducted themselves in front of the Select Committee. It is independent. Understandably, in medicine the bodies that make clinical guidance do not direct the answer for that clinical guidance to the Secretary of State. I understand the hon. Lady's strength of feeling and that of others. I also understand the strength of feeling of the parents. I understand what a desperate situation they are in, and I am trying to make sure that it can be resolved and that they can get the drugs. I make one point to the hon. Lady: the very exercise of a clinical trial requires us to get the drugs to some children. I very much hope, therefore, that the start of a clinical trial can help to get the drugs to the people who need them. We do not have to wait for the results.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Although medicinal cannabis can have great benefits for some epileptic children, we should not forget the devastating impact that cannabis can have and its long-term impact on psychosis and schizophrenia. *[Interruption.]* I speak from personal experience of living with an affected family member. It is right that this is dealt with on a case-by-case basis. How soon will updated training be available for our health professionals?

Matt Hancock: The updated training will be available imminently. There are risks as well as upsides, and it is absolutely right that it is clinicians who make the judgment in respect of every decision and based on the individual patient. That, I am afraid, is the way in which medicine always has been—and, I imagine, always will be—practised in this country.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Secretary of State confirm whether it is true that if a Dutch mother brought the same medicine to the United Kingdom, she could administer it to her own Dutch child without the import licence that Emma Appleby is saying that she must have? If that is true, is this not just another example of how shambolically this policy is being implemented?

Matt Hancock: I do not know whether that is true—that is a question of Home Office policy on controlled drugs—but all in all that does not change the fact of the matter, which is that we need to resolve this issue as soon as possible.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If the principal issue is that doctors will not prescribe, is there a secondary problem when there is a prescription but the bureaucracy is failing to honour it?

Matt Hancock: I have heard that accusation being made by a couple of the parents. I am advised that that is not the case, but I am very much looking into it because in these circumstances I always think we need to listen to the people who are trying to resolve the issue. I am looking into that very point.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I have previously raised the case of my constituent, 11-month-old Nathaniel Leahy, who, owing to his extremely rare form of epilepsy, lives in great pain. His mum told me today:

“I am living in fear each day that Nathaniel will not make it to the next day. We were promised in November of last year that this medicine would be available.”

Does the Secretary of State understand the powerful sense of frustration felt by families such as Nathaniel’s, and will he address the question of the guidelines so that we can have fewer stringent guidelines, to benefit patients?

Matt Hancock: I entirely understand that sense of frustration. I went to meet some of the parents to hear directly from them the pain and suffering that they and their children are feeling, which I entirely understand. That is one of the reasons why we are pushing so hard to try to resolve this. Resolving the questions around the guidelines is also important but, as the hon. Gentleman knows, those guidelines are written independently of Ministers.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): My constituent Teagan Appleby suffers horrendously with one of the worst cases of child epilepsy in the United Kingdom. It has been heartrending to go round to her house to see her suffering. To see how her mother, Emma, copes with the challenge is inspiring.

Legal heroin, morphine, has been prescribed in this country for many decades. Why can we not have legal cannabis, too? Is it not high time that the NHS got on with changing the guidelines to make sure that medicinal cannabis is available, rather than wasting time arresting Emma at Southend airport, which is quite the wrong thing to see?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend represents Teagan Appleby, her family and her parents, and he speaks for the whole House in what he says. He has captured the essence of this debate. I am trying to resolve it to his satisfaction and to the family’s satisfaction as soon as possible. There are barriers to that resolution, and I am happy to work with him, with the APPG and with all others who have constituency cases to try to resolve this significant problem.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware of the case of my constituent Cole Thomson, aged six, who has battled repeated epileptic seizures every night and has had terrible periods of deterioration. In order to gain the prescription, we have had to battle

the system as well as the illness. Parents do not have the energy, when they are looking after a sick child, to battle the system, so can the Secretary of State ensure the streamlining of this process to make sure that specialist training is available? In the meantime, will he make available to parents a register of the specialists who can prescribe medicinal cannabis? The postcode lottery cannot go on.

Matt Hancock: Yes, I would be very happy to do both those things.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for his statement. I, like many others in this House, have had constituents visit me to make powerful, personal cases on the impact they think cannabis oil could have for their children. Will he join me in praising the work of the campaign group End Our Pain, which has done such a good job of highlighting this issue and making sure that we in this House are aware of the situation and of the benefits it can bring?

Matt Hancock: I have already paid tribute to the APPG, and today’s urgent question has demonstrated the breadth of concern in this House. Those who are independent of Government need to make sure that they listen to this level of concern. I am certainly determined to do everything I can to try to resolve this issue.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It has always been the case that the Home Secretary could issue a special licence to allow the medical use of cannabis oil. I understand that the Health Secretary may be seeing him this evening, and I wondered whether he will ask him to consider this course of action.

Matt Hancock: One of the great frustrations for me, for the Home Secretary and, of course, for the families is that, before the law was changed on 1 November, that course of action was open. For a few dozen cases, the Home Secretary made those special licences to allow for the use of medicinal cannabis. He and I changed the law together to try to make sure that medicinal cannabis is available on a mainstream basis. Now it is available on a mainstream basis, as a normal drug, it therefore needs clinical sign-off. The problem is there are so many cases where that clinical sign-off has not been forthcoming. That is a source of immense frustration to me, as I hope the hon. Lady can imagine, and it is what we are trying to resolve.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should be led by evidence? As our scientific knowledge continues to progress, so should the views and the laws made in this House. Will he provide more clarity, not just in this instance but as new and more radical drugs become available in the near future, on how our constituents and this House could benefit and push through laws more quickly?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. To ensure that the use of medical cannabis becomes mainstream, we need to ensure that the evidence base is there. Essentially, doctors think there is a much deeper

evidence base for CBD than for THC. There is a broader point, which is that the medical profession and this House need to keep up to speed with the evidence as it is developed. In this case, that means going out of our way to develop the evidence and to have clinical trials in which some of the patients who want the drug can participate. That will provide the evidence base that allows the vast array of specialists to prescribe it.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It was clear from the evidence given to the Health and Social Care Committee that the Government raised public expectations when they rescheduled medical cannabis. I wonder whether it is time for the Secretary of State to ensure that there is a public awareness campaign, with full information about what the Government are trying to do.

Matt Hancock: I will look at that idea and discuss it with the NHS. The training programme that we are putting in place is intended to raise awareness of the evidence and the change in rules among the profession—among doctors and the specialist prescribing doctors on the register. Ultimately, it is only with clinical sign-off that we allow any drug to be prescribed. That is where the training needs to be in the first instance, but I will look at the hon. Lady's suggestion of doing it more broadly.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Anyone who goes through the heart-rending experience of seeing a very sick family member suffer will know that they would do anything to help that person, often reaching the point of desperation. People need to be confident that they can get hold of cannabis-based medicines if it is appropriate and that those medicines are safe. In this instance, there is a lot riding on the shoulders of our doctors. Will my right hon. Friend assure us that doctors are being given the right guidance to do what is right for patients, but also that they will not be blamed if something goes wrong?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I think that is exactly the right approach and it is what we are working towards.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for raising this important issue, which affects one of my constituents, Murray Gray, directly. His mother is one of those parents who is now desperate, having been given hope.

Does the Secretary of State agree that we have the evidence from abroad that these medicines can work and we have the willingness of everybody in this House to make it work, but somehow there is a gap between our willingness and our ability to make it happen? Will he assure the House that he will speak to the Home Secretary and to the devolved Administrations who have NHS responsibility to try to get some kind of action through co-operation to reassure the parents who are desperate not just because their children will suffer but because they may not survive?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course; I am very happy to do that. Perhaps I should take this opportunity to welcome the new public health Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the

Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) to her post. She will, no doubt, have listened to all the questions today. She and I will be working on making this happen.

I would add to the hon. Lady's list, because this is not just about the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care; it is about making sure that the independent medical establishment has confidence in the evidence that is presented. It is not enough for her and I to have confidence as lay politicians; it is important that the professionals who put their signature on the line have confidence in the evidence as well.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Does the Secretary of State appreciate the public's concern that, at a time when several police forces have openly admitted that they will not take action against those involved in recreational cannabis use, the full weight of the Home Office's Border Force is deployed to intercept medication for a seriously ill young child? Surely getting medication to a seriously ill young girl should never be a crime.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Border Force should not be criticised in this case, because it was following the rules: if a clinician has not signed something off it cannot come in. It is incumbent on us on the health side to sort out this problem. He makes a broader point, however, that this is a completely separate issue to the recreational use of cannabis. I do not support a change in the rules on the recreational use of cannabis; this is about the specialist provision of drugs to some children who are the most vulnerable people in society, and the need to ensure that the medical benefits of such drugs can be brought to bear on people who really need them.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Like many colleagues, I have spoken with parents of children who have profound challenges that could be ameliorated by medicinal cannabis. They are at their wits' end, and it is no surprise to find that some in this country resort to desperate measures. I have listened for 45 minutes now and I cannot tell the answer to this question: is the Secretary of State really saying that we have a clear, universal, safe and compassionate approach to this issue and, if we do not, when will we?

Matt Hancock: I am saying that if a patient needs medicinal cannabis, and if a clinician will sign off on that need, the prescription can happen. The guidance from the association does not override the individual judgment of that clinician. That can happen but, because it has not been happening in many cases that have been brought to light, some privately and some very publically, I am putting in place a system of second opinions to ensure that we can get that clinical decision right, at the same time as developing a stronger evidence base for the future.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Reuben Young is an 11-year-old boy in my constituency who suffers from myoclonic astatic epilepsy, which is a severe and rare form of epilepsy. His mother, Emma, is at her wits' end. Conventional medicines do not work and she has tried to get a prescription for Epidiolex, which is a cannabis-derived medicine. She tells me that she is unable to get it because the physicians involved say that the guidelines prevent them from prescribing it. I do not

[Tommy Sheppard]

know why, but for some reason the change in policy last November is not leading to a change in practice. I ask the Secretary of State to speak with the Home Secretary and to have an urgent—I mean in days or weeks—review to see how the existing guidelines can do better.

Matt Hancock: Those guidelines are not a matter for the Home Secretary; they are guidelines in the health space, although the association that writes them does not report directly to me but is independent. Those guidelines do not prevent a physician who is on the specialist register of the General Medical Council from prescribing. If anybody has been told that they do, they do not; it is up to the individual professional judgment of a specialist clinician on the register to prescribe or not.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Lara Smith, my constituent, is really upset about what happened to Teagan and her family at the weekend. Lara travels to Holland every three months to get a schedule 2 drug, Bedrocan, for her seriously debilitating illness. It could be imported but, if it was, unfortunately, she would have to bear the licence fee. Will the Minister say whether anything can be done for her?

Matt Hancock: Yes. My heart goes out to the hon. Lady's constituent and her family. One of the purposes of the evidence gathering that we are doing, and of the calls of the national institute for trials, is to provide the evidence on which the NHS could routinely provide those medicines. At the moment, we have the ability for specialists to prescribe in the interim, but I want to get the evidence base in place for the longer term.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): One of my constituents—one of many who has been in touch with me about this issue—has multiple sclerosis and found previously that cannabis helped his symptoms immensely, but he does not want to break the law and he cannot get a prescription. What would the Secretary of State advise him to do?

Matt Hancock: If the hon. Lady will write to me with the case, we will get a second opinion from a clinician who may be able to make that prescription.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I agree that we need to remove the barriers for clinicians. We need evidence, but the problem with randomised control trials is the nature of cannabis. The fact that it contains many different compounds that interact makes it difficult to isolate the compounds that work for individuals. Cannabis is a unique treatment, and should really be in a licensing and scheduling category of its own to allow different approaches. I urge the Secretary of State to encourage observational trials so that we can allow patients to get access to the medical cannabis that will work for them.

Matt Hancock: We looked at observational trials, but the problem is that they do not build the evidence base that a full RCT does. A full RCT also allows some patients to get access while the trial is ongoing, so it is in fact a better proposal. It means that some patients can

get the treatment now for the purposes of the trial, and then we can get a full evidence base for the long term, as was mentioned previously.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The law may be an ass, but it does not have to be applied in an asinine way, as it was in the case of Emma Appleby. Will the Secretary of State have words with the Home Secretary to make sure that it is not repeated? My constituent, Bailey Williams, is 16 years of age and suffers from the most severe form of epilepsy. He has multiple seizures every day. His parents, Rachel and Craig, are absolutely convinced that we need observational trials and more immediate action. I accept that this was unintended, but sadly the change in the law has made things worse, not better, for those parents. What will the Secretary of State do to turn that around quickly?

Matt Hancock: It is a source of deep frustration to me that the change in the law to normalise the use of medicinal cannabis has, exactly as the hon. Gentleman says, meant that, because a clinical decision is needed for a prescription, and because in many cases clinical decisions are not forthcoming, many parents who entirely understandably think that their child would benefit from medicinal cannabis now find that they cannot get a clinician to sign it off. That is at the root of the problems that we are trying to tackle today.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Although the Secretary of State is adamant that the guidelines are not a problem, it is clear that they and the associated liability are an issue. Let us hope that the review will pick that up. Four-year-old Logan Chafey in my constituency is the only child in the whole of Europe who has chromosome 7p duplication syndrome. One of the current rules is that there needs to be a proven benefit before a clinician can prescribe medicinal cannabis. How can we get to a position where Logan can get medicinal cannabis?

Matt Hancock: He will be able to get it now if a clinician is prepared to sign off on it being the right thing for him. If that is not forthcoming now, I have announced today a system of second opinions to allow people to get the clinical sign-off that they need.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) *rose*—

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is in the interest of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) that I call his Chief Whip before him.

Patrick Grady: The expectations of too many families have been raised by the Government's previous announcements. It really is time that they get a move on. I will write to the Secretary of State about my young constituent who has Aicardi syndrome. Her parents firmly believe that medical cannabis would help her symptoms and seizures. What steps is he taking to ensure that those kinds of rare syndromes are taken into account at trial stage?

Matt Hancock: They must be taken into account. It comes down to the question of the complexity of cannabis and the many dozens of active agents in it; CBD and THC, which we have mostly been discussing today, are the main ones. Many drugs have similarly complex interactions. Modern science and medicine are capable, in a controlled environment, of getting to the bottom of which ones have the effect. That is why it is better to do a full RCT with the full scientific structure around it, rather than an observational trial. That will get the drugs to the people who need them quickly, and will provide the evidence base. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Gentleman that, in that space, we are doing as much as we can. On the timing, I want it to happen as quickly as possible.

Stuart C. McDonald: It was a very wise decision. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I, too, have constituents who have been exiled to the Netherlands to secure medicinal cannabis for a severely epileptic child, and others who are spending a fortune importing cannabis oil from Canada to help slow the progression of a terminal brain tumour. Will families such as these soon be able to take part in proper clinical trials, as they would be able to elsewhere, so that they can have some hope and we can all benefit from the evidence that will be gained?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. If the hon. Gentleman will write to me about the specific case, I will ensure it is dealt with appropriately.

Libya

4.35 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Libya.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Yet again, this is a dangerous moment for Libya. The UK has wholeheartedly supported the UN's tireless work under its own action plan to prepare the ground for the national conference due to take place in Libya on 14 April. The UK has warned that any Libyan national army advance on Tripoli would be catastrophic for this political and diplomatic process and risks a descent into more widespread violence. I am afraid I have to tell the House that this scenario appears to be developing, following the LNA advances towards the west and south of Tripoli and the subsequent mobilisation of forces loyal to the internationally recognised Government of National Accord, headed by the Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj, to oppose that advance.

General Haftar, who is the leader of the Libyan national army, and his aligned forces retain control of Gharyan, which is only 75 km from Tripoli, and have taken the international airport to the south of the capital. I should say that that is not the central Mitiga airport, which is more usually used by those travelling to the city. It was reported only yesterday that some 21 people were killed, and I understand there is ongoing fire almost as we speak.

General Haftar appears to show no sign of stalling his advance, despite urgent diplomatic efforts to urge de-escalation, including a meeting with UN Secretary-General Guterres last week in Tripoli. We continue to focus our diplomatic lobbying on key international partners, and I know that the Foreign Secretary—he is at the Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels today—has worked together with the other G7 nations, which have come out with a notice on this matter. We therefore call on regional counterparts, in particular in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, to have an eye on the peace plan that has been proposed.

There of course remains a severe risk of escalation between pro-LNA and anti-LNA armed groups. For our purposes, political staff in post have been withdrawn for some time to the Libya office in Tunis in neighbouring Tunisia. The House will appreciate, I hope, that we will not go into great specific detail about exactly what remaining diplomatic staff we have in that country. Obviously, we are keeping these matters under review.

All Libyan parties need urgently to pursue de-escalation to avoid further miscalculation and to recommit unashamedly to the UN-led initiative and political process. There is still time to prevent further violence and to find a political solution. Any party whose actions precipitate violence and bloodshed should now be held accountable by the international community. I call on all our international partners to send the strongest possible message to the LNA commander, Haftar, to back down and to re-engage with the UN process. Indeed, it was at the instigation of the UK, as the penholder at the UN Security Council, that a special session was held at the Security Council in New York on Friday.

[Mark Field]

The UN reports that the violence has caused the displacement of more than 2,800 people in recent months, which has meant that emergency aid cannot reach casualties, including civilians. It is imperative that all parties respect international humanitarian and human rights law. The UK will continue its concerted diplomatic efforts to urge de-escalation in Libya. We will work in the UN Security Council, the European Union and all other international forums to urge all parties in Libya to re-engage with the political process.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I thank officials in his Department in particular for their ongoing work.

Despite everything else that is going on in Government, I am sure the Minister agrees that the UK has a special responsibility to Libya after the military intervention under the coalition Government. In the aftermath of that conflict and the overthrow of Colonel Gaddafi, Libya has indeed joined the list of failed and fragile states around the world, and, as during the current violence, it is the people of Libya who have suffered the most.

Back in 2011, before the military action, Mr Cameron warned at the Scottish Conservative party conference that if we did not take action,

“Libya will become once again a pariah state, festering on Europe’s border, a source of instability, exporting strife beyond her borders”.

My concern is that the lessons of Iraq clearly were not learned in Libya, with spending on military action far outstripping spending on rebuilding. One UN official described the UK’s efforts as

“paltry bone-throwing from a European country whose bombers reaped so much destruction”.

What lessons have been learned from Iraq, and from Libya previously, as we respond to this latest crisis? More specifically, What bilateral support are the UK Government providing for the UN peace process, good governance in Libya, and internal and external security measures in that country?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I think the whole House recognises, as he does, that despite all the other excitement there are a number of areas where the Foreign Office and other elements of Government still have a very active role to play. I think we can be very proud of the work we do. He will know that we are also a penholder at the UN in relation to Yemen, and of course I answered an urgent question on that matter in the House only 10 days ago.

The hon. Gentleman is pretty robust in his views about what happened in 2011. He will remember that, although the intervention was international—it was called for by the Arab League and authorised by the UN Security Council—this Parliament voted in support of UK involvement to prevent attacks on civilians. However, he is correct that after that intervention, although the UK played a role in trying to ensure that there was further planning for a Libyan-owned, UN co-ordinated stabilisation effort, that did not come to pass in the way we would have liked.

There were clear early successes in the immediate aftermath of 2011 that were not sustained. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, General Haftar, who was himself in exile for some 20 years, having fallen out with

the Gaddafi regime at the beginning of the 1990s, returned and was regarded as an international operator, with close connections with the US Administration. Obviously, he was not able to make as much progress as he would have liked immediately in 2011, and then, when the civil war broke out in 2014, he had a part to play.

The concern one has about the Haftar regime is whether another strongman is what Libya requires. I think Libya requires democracy. It requires the sort of work the UN will continue steadfastly to do and try to bring about. My biggest concern is that it is very evident that General Haftar does not regard democracy as an important way forward for Libya. Clearly, a number of other groups associated with him are working in a rather negative way, not least given their religious connotations, whether they are from Egypt, the UAE or elsewhere. As a result, I do not think that is the right way forward.

I wanted to give a full answer to the hon. Gentleman, who requested this urgent question. Please be assured that the UK continues to work with international partners in this regard. We take very seriously our responsibilities in that part of the world. As the hon. Gentleman is well aware, the implications of Libya becoming a failed state in terms of migration flows, which have already been fairly substantial over the last three or four years since the civil war broke out, are obviously very worrying. It is evident that the international contingent will need to work together for quite some time to try to bring stability to that country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I observe that there is considerable competition between cerebral colleagues—very challenging for the Chair. I call Andrew Mitchell.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Minister is surely right that all members of the international community should line up behind the proposals put forward by António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The Minister is equally right to underline the point that the earlier British intervention was a humanitarian intervention, approved by the United Nations, to stop a terrible massacre of people in Benghazi, which would have taken place had we not intervened.

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for what he has said. We were exchanging notes earlier—we were both abroad this weekend and rushed back, from Rwanda in his case and Bangladesh in mine, for this statement.

Let me say a little about the broader aid work that has been done. As part of the Department for International Development’s £75 million migration programme, working along the whole route from west Africa via the Sahel to Libya, up to £5 million has been allocated for humanitarian assistance and protection for migrants and refugees in Libya, including targeted healthcare. We will continue to do that important work into the future, with humanitarian measures in mind.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I also thank the hon. Member for North East

Fife (Stephen Gethins) for securing it. I can only echo what he and the Minister said about the latest disastrous turn of events in Libya and what must be done to address it. As things stand, Libya faces the worst possible choice, between a return to autocratic military rule and permanent civil war. I join others in urging the Government not just to put pressure on Egypt and the UAE, as the Minister mentioned, but to put pressure on France to cease its support for Haftar's assault on Tripoli and to get the UN peace process back on track.

In the short time that I have, I want to ask the Minister of State, as the hon. Member for North East Fife did, whether he agrees that what we are seeing today shows that the lessons of our intervention in Iraq have not been learned—not truly, not really—and also shows how wrong David Cameron was to suggest that they had been when he published the Chilcot report in 2016. As I said back then, so many of the same disastrous mistakes made by the Governments of the UK and the US over Libya were made by their predecessors over Iraq, most importantly the total and inexcusable failure to prepare for the aftermath of intervention and regime change and to prevent the descent into civil war and instability that Libya still faces today.

How ironic that, a week after he published the Chilcot report, David Cameron left office having created another total mess, with no planning for the aftermath and leaving it to others to face the consequences. As well as everything that must be done now to deal with the situation in Libya today, does the Minister of State agree that it is time for the Government to revisit the recommendations of the Chilcot report to ensure not just that there are no more Iraqs, but that there are no more Libyas?

Mark Field: The recommendations of the Chilcot report were accepted by the Government of the time and I am sure play an active day-to-day part in all the work done in places such as Libya and will continue to do so.

The right hon. Lady asks about the message that we might have for the French Government, who, as she rightly points out, have a stronger relationship with General Haftar and his group. We are working together, as she will be aware, both at the UN Security Council and in the EU, and the G7 have issued a joint statement to bring everyone to the table.

Many hon. Members in all parts of the House would not disagree with much of what the right hon. Lady says. Our engagement and involvement in Iraq and Libya have turned out to have calamitous outcomes. Some progress has been made—one looks to Iraq, where Islamic State has been taken out of the picture. The concern that many rightly have now is about an escalating conflict in Libya. One reason for the urgency behind trying to get everyone round the table to secure a peaceful and diplomatic solution is the concern that Libya could again become a recruiting partner for Islamic State and strengthen Islamic State, which has been wiped out in Iraq and Syria.

We all recognise how interconnected all these issues are. It is important to try to work together constructively. I would like to think that there have been lessons learned, and I think that Chilcot provides an important blueprint and template to ensure that we learn those lessons in future.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I very much welcome the Minister's comments on the UK's actions and potential actions in Libya in coming days, but will he touch on the actions of other nations? We have already heard France mentioned and perhaps the United States should be asked whether it has a view, but surely the most important thing is to ask the Kremlin what it is doing. It has troops on the ground, provides military assistance and is already playing a very important role in destabilising the country. Perhaps he could ask his Russian opposite number what Russia is doing to try to bring peace to the country.

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: Russia has clearly been supportive of the Haftar initiative. It is therefore all the more important that it is kept on board. There is no doubt that the US has a major interest. General Haftar spent 20 years in the US, so is clearly well-connected in that Administration. We are trying to do as much work as we can within the UN framework. As my hon. Friend will be aware, António Guterres was literally in Libya at the end of last week for the preliminary stage of trying to work through the conference that we still hope will take place at the end of next week. The UN is clearly the right way to do this. I very much hope that my line manager, the Foreign Secretary, will, in the course of the next few days, have options to speak with various counterparts, including those from Russia.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The lesson from Libya and many other countries is that after a long period of brutal dictatorship it is not uncommon to see different factions fighting for power to see who will take over. As the Minister said, we must do everything we can to support Prime Minister al-Serraj's Government. The question I want to ask the Minister is on humanitarian assistance. I welcome his announcement about the money DFID will provide, but given the proximity of General Haftar's forces to Tripoli, who will actually be able to provide that humanitarian assistance on the ground if, heaven forbid, there is even more fighting in the suburbs of Tripoli, given that we hear reports that many people from the international community are in the process of being, if they have not already been, evacuated from Tripoli?

Mark Field: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, which I alluded to in my reply to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins). It is a concern that some humanitarian aid, which is so desperately required for the most recent incidents, cannot reach people. We will work with the international community. Through our aid efforts we already work with a number of NGOs with long-standing connections on the ground, but this is a fluid situation that will require a long and concerted international effort. We are watching what is happening on a day-by-day basis. It is in everyone's interests that all parties get around the table at the earliest possible opportunity for the reasons the right hon. Gentleman points out. The worst of all options for the humanitarian situation is that there are ungoverned spaces in Libya where terrible atrocities have taken place and will continue to take place.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The proud author and owner of a doctorate in strategic studies, Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that introduction. Which side are our sworn Islamist enemies backing in Libya?

Mark Field: My right hon. Friend, I know, feels strongly about these matters. They are backing different sides. All sides have, in a quite disparate way, elements of Islamic State or other extremist Islamist groups. This is the nub of the problem. Faustian bargains have been made by most of those who would either be warlords or would run Libya. They are building very unstable coalitions, which I think are very destructive for the reasons he alludes to.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): There is significant evidence that the United Arab Emirates is supporting Haftar's efforts in east Libya. Surely we, as candid friends of the Emiratis, should make it clear to them that that is unacceptable. Does that take us to a point where, as candid friends, we may need to be a bit more candid and a bit less friendly?

Mark Field: There is little doubt that the influence of the United States only last year in the Benghazi region was profound. At that point, when it looked as though Haftar was going to move forward, it was made clear that the US would not just be unsupportive but would prevent such efforts. As I have said, the situation is now very fluid. We will make strong representations to those from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia who have essentially backed the Haftar efforts in east and south Libya. We also very much hope that they use whatever diplomatic efforts they can to bring him to the negotiating table.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Not a doctor, but a former Minister, no less: Sir Henry Bellingham.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. First, I declare my interest as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Libya. I congratulate the Minister and the UK on the role they played in helping to secure the recent UN Security Council resolution condemning the military advance. Does he agree that it is extremely disappointing that Haftar ignored the recent EU delegation at Benghazi that urged him to allow the forthcoming national conference to go ahead? He has mentioned this already, but will he give more details about those countries—the UAE, Egypt and Russia in particular—that have actively supported General Haftar? What more can we do to ensure that they play a constructive role?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend, who was the Minister for Africa and is our trade envoy to Libya. As he said to me earlier, there is understandably not a lot of trade going on between the countries at the moment, but I know he has a strong interest in and love of Libya and that he wishes that country all the best.

We are doing all that we can within the international community. There is a united UN front to try to ensure that we move ahead and that the conference takes place next week. It is the only game in town to ensure a better life for all Libyans going forward.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): With tensions escalating, what concrete action are the Government taking to deal with the terrible conditions in the camps on the coast of Libya where people are being trafficked?

Mark Field: As I pointed out to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the difficulty is that, as conflict starts, suddenly other parts of Libya become difficult to reach for many involved in humanitarian aid-giving. As the hon. Lady will know, we are doing all that we can within those camps. I touched on the substantial amount of money we have put in through our DFID budget in years gone by, and we will continue to do so in as accurate a way as possible. She rightly points out that issues such as people trafficking and sexual violence in conflict are at the forefront of our mind. We recognise that there are major issues in Libya as it stands.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The Lincolnshire knight: Sir Edward Leigh.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Here we go again, making the same mistakes as we made in Iraq and Syria. I agree with everything the shadow Foreign Secretary said. The Government of national accord is actually a Government of national chaos, deeply infiltrated by jihadism. Does the Minister think that Egypt is safer, and the people happier, with the Government of General Sisi or the Government of the Muslim Brotherhood?

Mark Field: As a relatively new boy to this brief, I will not speculate on that issue. On the point my right hon. Friend alluded to, which came up earlier, I am afraid the truth is jihadists are playing a part in almost all of these organisations. Things are much more factionalised than meets the eye, so compromises are always being made in supporting one side or another. There is an elected Government in Syria headed by the Prime Minister, Faye al-Serraj, and we are rightly doing our best to support that Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call the president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Mrs Madeleine Moon.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Is it in fact time to look at events in Libya as a wake-up call in relation to Russia's increasing involvement in Africa? It is looking for bases for its troops and access to Libyan ports. It already has naval logistics centres in Eritrea and Sudan, military co-operation agreements with Burkina Faso, Burundi, Mali and Madagascar, and contracts for its mercenaries in the Central African Republic, Sudan, Niger, Chad and Mauritania, all of whom, coincidentally, give it support at the United Nations. Is it not time to look at the bigger picture?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I like to think that we do try to look at the bigger picture, but she is right. Increasingly, for economic and other reasons, including diplomatic reasons, as she rightly says—having support at the United Nations is important

to both Russia and China, for example—we do need to look at the bigger picture. The opportunities that are there because of the rising population of Africa mean that it will receive more and more attention, which is sometimes paid, I am afraid, in a rather nefarious way, as she pointed out.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Recent developments in Libya are very worrying for the Libyan population, but in recent years Libya has been a route for many economic migrants, asylum seekers and those fleeing war in other parts of Africa. What assessment has the Minister made of the likely impact on migrants seeking to come across in very perilous conditions to places such as Lampedusa in the Mediterranean, and what discussions has he had with our still EU partners about the precautions that can be taken to deal with a potential flood of further refugees?

Mark Field: I am afraid that my hon. Friend is absolutely right: the porous borders in other parts of Africa and the fact that Libya is on the seafront of the Mediterranean make it an attractive proposition. The British Government have allocated some £12 million in this financial year for Libya through the conflict, stability and security fund, which is designed to boost not only political participation but economic development, which is key to providing opportunities to generations of Libyans as well as, hopefully, in other parts of Africa. We are trying to support the delivery of greater security, stability and resilience in the entirety of this region.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): It is simplistic to draw analogies between Libya and Iraq, but does the Minister agree that the intervention in Libya was to stop a potential massacre in Benghazi, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said? The Minister also made the point in his statement that 260,000 people have been displaced. What assessment have the Government made about further displacement and the effect on migration and refugees travelling across the Mediterranean?

Mark Field: There is an ongoing assessment of migrant flows, and clearly we work closely with many of our EU partners—not least Italy, which is often the recipient of large numbers coming through. Just to touch on the issue of detention centres, there are appalling conditions in many of them. While we do not fund Libyan detention centres—they are the responsibility of Libyan authorities—we recognise that that becomes the starting point for many of the migrant journeys to which the right hon. Gentleman refers.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I thank the Minister for the update and I am glad to hear that he is encouraging restraint on all sides to avoid bloodshed and violence. Does he have a message for the Government of France, who have a close relationship with General Haftar?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the French, and as I pointed out, the United States, or aspects of the US Administration, also has a close relationship. We are calling on all international partners to use whatever influence they have to implore General Haftar to back down and to promote the peace process, which is obviously handled at the UN. I know that my

right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has spoken to his French counterpart only today in Brussels and has made that case.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): Would it be correct to say that this recent move is driven by a 75-year-old general in a hurry, who wants to create facts on the ground, supported by a coalition of anti-Muslim Brotherhood countries from the Arab world, including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, and others who wish to exploit the oil if General Haftar takes control of it?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman knows much about this subject, and has obviously kept an eye on Libyan affairs for quite some time. General Haftar may not be the only old man in a hurry, in certain ways.

I think that the hon. Gentleman is broadly right, although I fear that the situation is less linear than he suggests. There may be groups who do not like the Muslim Brotherhood, but I think that some Faustian bargains are being made when it comes to the coalitions that are being formed. As the hon. Gentleman says, given that the strength of General Haftar's work has tended to be in the Benghazi region, oil is clearly very much at the forefront of his mind.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Secretary General of the United Nations said that he was leaving Libya with a heavy heart, and that he was deeply concerned about the escalation of the conflict there. However, a diplomatic and political conflict is going on behind the scenes between France and Italy. Given that both those countries are members of the European Union and of NATO, what more can the UK Government do to bring about political and diplomatic consensus, especially in view of the fact that the Russians are now very close to the new Italian Government?

Mark Field: I think that there is consensus among our European Union neighbours, and, as I have said, the G7 have issued a statement. It was greatly to be regretted that, for safety reasons, the Secretary General of the United Nations had to flee literally 10 days before we were hoping to get the conference under way. However, I think that a lot of diplomatic work is going on. There is a great deal of concern in the international community, which recognises that if Libya were to become a failed state, all the migration issues—as well as, obviously, the massive humanitarian issues—that we have seen in recent years would only worsen. However, we are working very closely with all our international partners, and will continue to do so.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It pains me to say that in 2011, in a speech that I made during a debate about the military intervention in Libya, I predicted everything that has been happening there since that intervention. Members are welcome to read the speech in *Hansard*. It is also disturbing—and has been confirmed by a report from the Foreign Affairs Committee—that there was no immediate humanitarian need requiring a military intervention. What practical assistance are we providing for the refugees—especially children—who have been caught in Tripoli?

Mark Field: I think it a little unfair of the hon. Lady to suggest that there was no humanitarian issue in 2011. We went in because of what was happening in Benghazi.

[*Mark Field*]

I accept that the early optimism and successes were not sustained, and that would clearly have to happen at UN level.

I mentioned earlier the amount of aid that we continue to put into Libya. We have invested some £75 million in the migration programme, working across the whole route from west Africa to Libya via the Sahel. As I have said, we will also do all that we can in the camps that are not run by the Libyan authorities. We are all very concerned that a further outbreak of hostilities will only lead to even more humanitarian misery.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Whatever the result of the power struggle in Libya, the priority of our Government will still be to work towards compensation for the victims of Semtex supplied by Libya to the IRA. I welcome the appointment of William Shawcross to look into the whole issue, but will my right hon. Friend assure the victims that it will not be sidelined, and that the Government will continue to pursue it to ensure that justice is done and compensation is paid to those who suffered so horribly at the hands of the IRA?

Mark Field: May I first correct something that I said earlier? The UN Secretary General did not flee Libya, and I am sorry if I gave that impression and there was a misapprehension. Obviously, the UN still has a significant presence in Libya.

We all want to see a just solution for all the victims of Gaddafi-sponsored IRA terrorism, but the political and security situation in Libya has, I am afraid, effectively stalled further discussion with the authorities about a resolution of the important legacy issues to which my hon. Friend referred. He also referred to the appointment of William Shawcross as the special representative on UK victims, which forms part of the UK's ongoing commitment to helping the victims of Libya-supported IRA terrorism. I share many of his concerns and much of his impatience: we would have liked to see more progress. I think he will understand that the general instability in Libya has made that difficult, but we are working steadfastly and will continue to do so.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The situation in Libya is looking increasingly desperate, as the country is on the brink of slipping back into authoritarian control. Will the Minister therefore tell us what the outcome of the discussions at the United Nations on Friday was in terms of preventing a humanitarian as well as a political crisis?

Mark Field: To be fair, the reality was that the United Nations Security Council was trying to enhance, and make it clear that we were keen to continue with, the action plan, which would obviously have involved the conference taking place on the 14th, and to redouble the united voice of the United Nations in that regard. Clearly, the humanitarian aspects are part of the ongoing work at the bilateral level—through DFID, for us, and through other organisations—and are increasingly required at the UN and non-governmental organisation level.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend please tell the House what measures he and his Department are taking to ensure that UK staff based in Tripoli and elsewhere in Libya are being kept safe throughout these events?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. Our embassy in Tripoli has remained closed since 2014, but we do have a permanent diplomatic presence, and a lot of work involving Libyan issues is undertaken from Tunis, in neighbouring Tunisia.

We do try to update the travel advice on a factual basis, and the message that we have broadly for British nationals in Libya—clearly, there are relatively few still there—states at the moment that consular assistance is not available, for obvious reasons, and that we are therefore unable to provide any form of assisted departure. That is a fairly strong signal for UK nationals that, unless it is absolutely necessary for them to be in Libya, we would advise them not to be there.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Libya is on the edge of a precipice. It is the biggest arms supplier to ISIS, Daesh, the Fulani herdsmen and criminal gangs. North Africa and middle Africa are in danger of being sucked into terrorism at levels never seen before. Can the Minister outline how he intends to use any available diplomatic and financial pressure to ensure that there is a crackdown on the international black market in the sale of arms?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman is right. One of the depressing things is that Libya has been at the edge of a precipice for more years than any of us cares to remember. As the penholder for Libya at the UN Security Council, the UK has made it and will continue to make it a priority to ensure that there is meaningful action against the illegal flow of weapons into and out of Libya. We led on Security Council resolution 2292, which authorises all member states and regional organisations to take specific and measured steps to interdict suspected embargo-breaking vessels off Libya's coast.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Following Russia's decisive and successful intervention in support of President Assad, it now appears that Russia is backing General Haftar in Libya. What is to stop the west's strategic foreign policy objectives being just as much of a failure in Libya as they were in Syria?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his rather bleak analysis of the situation. Clearly, there are fundamental differences between what is happening in Syria and in Libya. Each of those is unique, and it would be unwise to draw too many direct parallels. As I pointed out, there are other nations involved; this is not just about Russian-led support for General Haftar—as I say, there is support from Egypt, France and the United Arab Emirates. We will do all we can in our role in the UN Security Council to try to broker an international solution, and that, I am afraid, can be the only sensible way forward.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): One of the worst consequences of the conflict in Libya has been the re-emergence of an open slave trade in parts of the country, with many media interviews showing open auctions of humans. What is the British Government's assessment of the scale of the problem, and what can be done with our international partners to break down the supply chain in humans?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the most bleak aspect of the humanitarian side is modern-day slavery and people trafficking. I do not have the

information that he requests. The precise nature of the problem is obviously in part a matter for the Department for International Development, but I am afraid it is clear that this has become prevalent not just in Libya but in a number of neighbouring countries, and that the supply lines also cross the Mediterranean.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): There are various factions in Libya, including the Government of national accord and the Libyan national army. Whoever forms the next Government after this skirmish, will my right hon. Friend ensure that the perpetrators of the bombing in Manchester will be brought to justice? As yet, the internationally recognised Government have not supplied that extradition.

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his observations. Let me make it clear that the international community stands behind the Government of national accord, the elected Government of Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj. There is clearly speculation as to whether there was any nexus between our intervention in Libya and the Manchester attack, but we are aware that there were Libyan nationals involved and we will obviously do our best to ensure extradition and justice at an early opportunity. However, the experience of what happened in Lockerbie means that we will have to recognise that this may take some time.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I have a number of Libyan constituents who have left Libya for reasons that the Minister will understand, and some of them have been waiting for decisions from the Home Office for quite some time. He alluded to the travel advice issued by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Is there any other advice that is shared between the FCO and the Home Office that could bring closure to my constituents?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady represents a city centre seat, as I do, and I am well aware of the issues faced by people who want to make their lives in the United Kingdom and who would make a great contribution here. Those people want their situation to be regularised, but these are inevitably issues for the Home Office. I am sorry—I am not trying to get out of this matter, but I think it would be useful for her to contact the Home Office with the specifics.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Libya is a country with immense potential, given its resource wealth and its position in the Mediterranean, yet there is something quite tragic about the fact that, having effected the displacement of its Government, the British state has not been in any way competent in effecting the transition to a peaceful solution in Libya. We have to take responsibility for that reality. What will this Government do to ensure that the United Nations-backed Government of national accord are properly resourced to effect security and stability on the ground?

They are clearly failing to do that at the moment, and they are being displaced by other forces sponsored by other foreign powers.

Mark Field: While everyone needs to take responsibility for issues that have happened in the past in Libya, it would be a little unfair to suggest that things were perfect before our engagement there in 2011. We all recognise that there have been major problems for some time, but the tragedy of what has happened in Libya and elsewhere is that things at least seemed to be better when there was a strongman dictator in charge, and that when we tried to move towards a more pluralistic and democratic outcome, things got worse. In my view, that should not in any way be a justification for dictatorship or autocracy, but it has tended to be the case. A number of dictators, including Gaddafi, have been supported by the west in the aftermath of 2003 and leading up to 2011. These are difficult issues that we inevitably have to deal with, but responsibility has to be shared with the people on the ground. The tragedy of what has happened in Libya is that it has been a divided country almost since it was created—it was created using rather an artificial divide—and the only time there appeared to be stability was under a dictatorship. That is a terrible lesson for future generations of Libyans to learn.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): As we have heard, many thousands of migrants have already suffered outrageous human rights abuses in Libya, including in appalling detention centres. Will the Government now argue at international level for an urgent rethink of the inhumane policy of facilitating the return to those very conditions of many of the migrants being rescued from the Mediterranean?

Mark Field: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for saying that that is clearly a matter for the Home Office, rather than the Foreign Office. However, if the humanitarian situation in Libya deteriorates further, clearly the whole Government will have that in mind.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Libyan crisis followed a similar crisis in Tunisia, and it is now a compound crisis, given the resignation of President Bouteflika in Algeria. Can the Minister therefore reassure the House that his Department is alive to the situation and to the problems that our Mediterranean neighbours now face with this compound crisis about to unfold on them?

Mark Field: We are very much alive to the situation. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the instability in the neighbouring countries of Algeria and Tunisia provides some concern for what might happen. The migrant flows, which we thought were being reduced from their height in 2015 and 2016, may yet increase substantially, so it is something that our European neighbours are well aware of. We recognise that we will all have to play our part in trying to handle that humanitarian misery flow.

Online Harms White Paper

5.21 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement. The Government have today published a White Paper setting out our proposals for making the internet a safer place. For so many people, the internet is an integral part of daily life; nearly 90% of UK adults are online, and for 12 to 15-year-olds the figure is 99%. As the internet continues to grow and transform our lives, we need to think carefully about how we want it to develop. In many ways, the internet is a powerful force for good; it can be used to forge connections, share knowledge and spread opportunity across the world. But it can also be used to circulate terrorist material, undermine civil discourse, spread disinformation, and to bully or abuse.

Our challenge as a society is to help shape an internet that is open and vibrant, but that also protects its users from harm. There is clear evidence that we are not succeeding. Over 8,000 sexual offences against children with an online element were reported to the police in 2017, and that figure is continuing to rise. Up to 20% of young people in the UK have experienced bullying online. The White Paper sets out many more examples of harms suffered. People are closing their social media accounts following unacceptable online abuse. For the vulnerable, online experiences can mean cyber-bullying and the risk of grooming and exploitation. We cannot allow such behaviour to undermine the very real benefits that the digital revolution can bring. If we surrender our online spaces to those who spread hate, abuse and fear, we will all lose.

This is a serious situation and it requires a serious response. The Government have taken time to consider what we might do and how we might do it. I am grateful to Members across the House, and indeed in the other place, for their consideration of these issues, in particular the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I am also grateful for the discussions I have had, including with the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and his Opposition Front-Bench colleagues. We intend to continue those conversations and to consult on what we propose, because it is vital that we get this right.

No one has done this before. There is no comprehensive international model to follow, and there are important balances to strike, in sustaining innovation in the digital economy and promoting freedom of speech, as well as reducing harm. None of that is straightforward, and the Government should not claim a monopoly on wisdom. That is why the consultation that will follow will be a genuine opportunity for Members of the House and others to contribute to these proposals.

It is also right to recognise that some work is already being done to make the internet a safer place, including by online companies themselves, but it has not been enough and it has been too reactive. It can no longer be right to leave online companies to decide for themselves what action should be taken, as some of them are beginning to recognise. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I have concluded that the Government must act and that the era of self-regulation of the internet must end.

The Government will create a new statutory duty of care, establishing it in law that online companies have a responsibility for the safety of their users. It will require companies to do what is reasonable to prevent harmful material from reaching those users. Compliance will be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator. The White Paper sets out the expectations for the steps that companies should take to fulfil the duty of care towards their users, and we expect the regulator to reflect those expectations in new codes of practice. In the case of the most serious harms, such as child sexual exploitation and abuse and the promotion of terrorism, the Home Secretary will need to approve codes of practice and will also have power to issue directions to the regulator about their content. The Home Office will publish interim codes of practice on these subjects later this year. We are consulting on the role that Parliament should have in relation to the codes, too.

If online companies are to persuade the regulator that they are meeting their duty of care to keep their users safe, there will need to be transparency about what is happening on their platforms and what they are doing about it. If they are unwilling to provide the necessary information voluntarily, the regulator will have the power to require annual transparency reports and to demand information from companies relating to the harms on their platforms.

It is also important to give users a voice in this system, so that they can have confidence that their concerns are being treated fairly. We will therefore expect companies to have an effective and easy-to-access complaints function. We are consulting on two further questions—how we can potentially provide users with an independent review mechanism, and how we might allow designated bodies to make super-complaints to defend the needs of users.

For a model based on duty of care to work, those subject to it must be held to account for how they fulfil that duty. That is why we have concluded that a regulator will be necessary, whether a new entity or an extension of the responsibilities of an existing regulatory body. The regulator must be paid for by the online companies, but it is essential that it commands public confidence in its independence, impartiality and effectiveness. We propose that the scope of the regulatory framework will be to cover companies that allow users to share or discover user-generated content or to interact with each other online, where that activity is currently unregulated. That includes a wide variety of organisations, both big and small, from a range of sectors, and the new regulatory regime will need to be flexible enough to operate effectively across them all.

There are two key principles in such an approach. First, the regulator will adopt a risk-based approach, prioritising regulatory action to tackle harms that have the greatest impact on individuals or wider society. Secondly, the regulator will require companies to take reasonable and proportionate actions to tackle harms on their services, taking account of their size and resources. The regulator will expect more of global giants than small start-ups. It is also necessary for the regulator to have sufficient teeth to hold companies to account when they are judged to have breached their statutory duty of care. That will include the power to serve remedial notices and to issue substantial fines, and we will consult on even more stringent sanctions, including senior management liability and the blocking of websites.

However, this regulatory approach is designed to encourage good behaviour as well as punish bad behaviour. Just as technology has created the challenges that we are addressing here, technology will provide many of the solutions, for example, in the identification of terrorist videos online and images of child sexual abuse or in new tools to identify online grooming. The regulator will therefore have broader responsibilities to promote the development and adoption of these technologies and to promote safety by design.

The truth is, however, that if we focus only on what Government or the online companies do, we miss something important. We all need the skills to keep ourselves safe online, and too few of us feel confident that we have them. We will therefore task the regulator to promote those skills, and we will develop a national media literacy strategy.

This White Paper does not aspire to deal with all that is wrong with the internet; no single piece of work could sensibly do so. This White Paper forms part of the Government's response to the many challenges that the online world brings, but it is focused on some of the most pernicious harms found online and it expects much more of the companies that operate there in tackling those harms. These are big steps, but they need to be taken.

Some will say that the internet is global so no country can act alone, but I believe that we have both a duty to act to protect UK citizens and an opportunity to lead the world on this. With well-deserved worldwide reputations for fostering innovation and respect for the rule of law, the United Kingdom is well placed to design a system of online regulation that the world will want to emulate.

The more we do online, the less acceptable it is that content which is controlled in any other environment is not controlled online. A safer internet is in the interests of responsible online companies, which want their customers to spend more time online, and it is a legitimate expectation of those we represent. That is what this White Paper will deliver, and I commend it and this statement to the House.

5.31 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his courtesy in giving advance notice of his statement. I also thank the members of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee for their meticulous work, much of which has made it into today's document.

Let me outline what I think is at stake. We are at an inflection point in technological and human advance. Data can transform this planet almost beyond our current comprehension. The ideas of John von Neumann, I.J. Good and Ray Kurzweil tell us how accelerating intelligence and artificial intelligence can lead to a technological singularity. On health, for example, it will allow humans to take control of their own cellular biology; cancer patients worldwide will be able to share their data for the common good.

At the heart of this revolution, however, is a public policy question about the legitimate use of our personal data. That legitimate use has been imperilled because a couple of early big data pioneers distorted the market by making crazy amounts of money from targeted advertising and then protecting their market dominance.

These past months, this House has felt more divided than at perhaps any time in our recent history, yet one person and one cause has united elected representatives

of all parties throughout the House—Mark Zuckerberg and the urgent need to bring social media giants into line.

It feels like we are living in a digital dystopia: a nightmare where a young girl commits suicide after being exposed to images of self-harm on Instagram; a business model where a massacre can be livestreamed on Facebook and the video shared thousands of times on YouTube; and a horror where a teenager is groomed in an online gaming community and then murdered in cold blood.

These companies are making billions extracting and monetising our personal data, and what do we get in return? Harms, hate speech and fake news filling our timelines and the minds of young and vulnerable people. It is no wonder that New Zealand's privacy commissioner called the executives of Facebook "morally bankrupt pathological liars" after the company refused to acknowledge any need to change its policies following the Christchurch mosque attacks. I cannot disagree with him.

We found out today that Google avoided £1.5 billion of corporation tax last year. That could have paid for 60,000 nurses for our NHS. This from a company with a net worth of £645 billion. The abuses and harms perpetrated online represent one of the toughest social policy challenges of modern times. It is our duty, as elected representatives and policy makers, to rise to that challenge, and it is to the Secretary of State's credit that he has clearly taken that duty seriously today.

Labour has already committed to many of the announcements in this White Paper. An independent regulator, a legal duty of care and a tough sanctions regime will support the Government in introducing these measures, but I have no doubt that the industry will fight back. The tech giants are certainly gearing up for a fight, hiring an army of lobbyists who I expect will be in touch with each of us very soon. I hope we can all make a commitment now that these measures will be the minimum standard of regulation and that we will not resile from any of the report's recommendations.

There is much in this White Paper to be commended, but we also have concerns. Our biggest fear is that the announcements will take months, if not years, to come to fruition. When terrorists are recruiting, children are being exploited and disinformation wars are being waged online, we do not have time to spare. We need action now. Will the Secretary of State commit to bringing forward the legislation on the new regulator in the next parliamentary Session?

There is nothing in this report about protecting our democracy from dark third-party political advertising and those who wish to sow disinformation and discord. Even Mark Zuckerberg has said that Governments need to introduce regulation to protect electoral integrity. Does the Secretary of State admit that this White Paper fails to do that?

The duty of care codes and the codes of conduct sound like very important steps, but the devil will be in the detail. For example disinformation, such as anti-vaccination propaganda, is being spread unchecked in closed groups on Facebook, contributing to a burgeoning public health crisis. Will the Secretary of State explain how this White Paper might tackle that?

Underlying all the harms, hate and fake news on social media platforms is one central, fundamental problem: the distorted digital market dominated by a

[Tom Watson]

small number of data monopolies. These companies surveil our every like and share, extract our data and sell it on to advertisers 10 times over. They are hoovering up companies big and small, suppressing competition and innovation. They are now so dominant that they think themselves too big to fail—untouchable by mere national Governments.

We agree with the Secretary of State that this is only the start, and we respect what is in this White Paper and will work to help deliver it, but the truth is that, until we deal with the fundamental issue of data monopolists dominating the market, we will never really see the end of this digital dystopia.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman not just for what he has said this afternoon but for the open approach he has taken to the discussion of these matters. As he says, this is one of the toughest policy challenges we face, and I believe we will resolve it only if we are able to work across the House to make sure that what we produce is as robust as it can be.

As the hon. Gentleman also says, there will be a considerable amount of resistance to what is proposed in this White Paper, and we will all need to hold our nerve in the face of that pressure. He asks about legislation, and it is our intention to legislate in the next parliamentary Session, but he will understand that there is a tension between the urgency, which we all accept exists, to tackle these harms and, indeed, to legislate to do so and the need to make sure that we have taken account of the views and the thinking that others can contribute. He knows that I have sought to do that up to this point, and I will seek to do it from this point on. I want to ensure that we make this as robust as we can, that we get it right, that we have understood the detail, and that it will stand up to the kind of scrutiny and pressure that he rightly describes. With that tension in mind, we will move as quickly as we can.

On electoral integrity, the hon. Gentleman heard me say a moment ago that the White Paper does not represent the sum total of the Government's action in relation to harms on the internet more broadly. He will know that the Cabinet Office will imminently be bringing forward its "defending democracy" piece of work. I hope he will find in that a good deal of the material he referred to. Indeed, while a good number of the Government's responses to the excellent piece of work produced by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee are, as he said, dealt with in the White Paper, some will be dealt with in that document.

Disinformation is, as the hon. Gentleman knows, one of the harms that we have identified in the White Paper as needing the attention of the regulator. We believe that a number of things can be done. We will expect the regulator, in its codes of practice and through the duty of care more broadly, to focus on the need to ensure that authoritative sources are prioritised over non-authoritative sources and that fact checking is available. There are other measures that the regulator could take, not least in respect of the point I made about public education. In relation to many of the issues on which disinformation is focused, we believe that the answer, at least in part, is to ensure that our fellow citizens are equipped with the skills they need to understand what

they should be looking for to determine what they believe and what they do not. That is a legitimate focus for the regulator.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman mentioned competition, and I understand his focus on that. Again, I make the point that it will be dealt with, but that it will be dealt with elsewhere. He will know about the Furman review, which was recently completed at the Government's instigation. We will take seriously what Professor Furman and his panel have said, and we will respond in due course. When we do so, the hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to take the matter up again, and I know he will.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his kind words acknowledging the work of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee and for accepting so many of our recommendations in the White Paper. I want to ask expressly about the investigatory powers of the proposed new regulator. Does he agree that it is important that the job of the regulator is not just to identify that a failure in the duty of care has occurred, but to go into the company and investigate why that failure occurred, who knew about it and when, and what needs to be done to ensure that such a failure does not happen again? Only with that sort of internal investigation and scrutiny will we be able to set companies back on the right path.

Jeremy Wright: I agree with my hon. Friend. He will see in the White Paper provisions to make transparency powers available to the regulator, not just so that it can ask for annual transparency reports from online companies, but so that when the regulator thinks it appropriate to do so, it can ask specific questions about information that it wishes to have. It will of course be important, as he will recognise from the work of the Select Committee, to make sure that the regulator is properly staffed with those who have the necessary skills and understanding to ask the right questions and then understand the answers. We will certainly attend to that, and I am grateful for the help of my hon. Friend and the Committee in developing some of the further detail.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. Although it is disappointing that the White Paper was delayed, I commend the Secretary of State and the Home Secretary on the sensible and robust plans, which the Scottish National party absolutely supports. The devil will, however, be in the detail.

The extended Ofcom or the new regulator that is created will have a big and serious job on its hands. Will the Secretary of State reassure us that any regulator will be properly resourced and have the full weight of the law behind it? The protection of vulnerable children is of particular concern to many of the stakeholders and schools I have spoken to in my Livingston constituency.

The Secretary of State made some important points about people closing their social media accounts because of abuse. The reality is that online abuse has a disproportionate impact on women and girls, who face sexism and misogyny, and are readily silenced online. I am sure that he will be aware of the work of Caroline Criado Perez and her book on this issue. In a world designed for men, women and girls are being rendered invisible. That cannot continue.

Just because a regulator is appointed does not mean it will be effective. The 2008 financial crash had to happen before the Financial Conduct Authority started to regulate effectively. Any regulator, the Secretary of State says, will be paid for by the online companies. Will he say more about how that will be levied? He also mentioned that the Home Secretary will publish an interim code of practice. Will he give us a sense of when that is to happen because, as we know, it is desperately needed?

I understand—we understand—that a balance needs to be struck with free speech. The tech companies seem to take the issues of terrorism, child abuse and paedophilia a bit more seriously, but the everyday abuse of people in public life and young people, particularly girls in schools, is a serious concern. I commend to the Secretary of State “The Burning” by Laura Bates, a brilliant book that draws on Laura’s own experience of talking to students in schools. It is about a young woman who is forced to move school and country because of the vitriolic abuse that she faced online.

The Secretary of State talks of a national media literacy strategy. That is welcome. I am sure that he is aware of the SNP-led Government’s child internet safety plan, and I hope that he will co-ordinate and work closely with the Governments in Scotland and the devolved nations.

Finally, it is imperative that any new regulation or legislation addresses the funding of political advertising online. The illegal activity of the leave campaign is a dark stain on our democracy. We must ensure that our democracy is not interfered with or damaged any further. We must get this right. For the sake of the family of Molly Russell and the victims of Christchurch, we must work together across this House to ensure that social media and tech companies are properly held to account.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I agree with much of what she says. She asks some good questions, which I will try to answer.

It is important that we have a regulator that is properly resourced. I said that it was our intention to ensure that the industry pays for that regulator, which is of course what one would normally expect, but whether that is predominantly through a levy or fine income is a question we have asked for views on in the course of the White Paper. We look forward to hearing what people have to say. I am open to persuasion either way, or a combination of the two might be the best way to proceed, but obviously the weight of payment must be with the industry.

The hon. Lady asks whether the regulator will have the weight of law behind it. It will. As I indicated, we will need to legislate to set up the regulator; it will need statutory underpinning. I hope that she will be supportive of that effort when we bring legislation before the House.

The hon. Lady makes a good point about online abuse of women and girls in particular. One of the reasons that I am so keen to see this process continue is that if we do not give the citizens of this country the opportunity to speak up online, to participate in the debate on what is now one of the central forums for debate, we will lose a huge number of powerful voices in the course of making our country a better place. To women—young women in particular—who feel that that is a

hostile environment in which to participate in debate, we have a particular duty. I believe that the regulator will help us to fulfil that duty.

The hon. Lady mentions codes of practice. She might not yet have seen that the social media code of practice is published alongside the White Paper, so that document is now available and I hope that online companies will start to take clear account of it. The work that the Home Office will now do will specifically be in relation to child sexual abuse and to the promotion of terrorism. Because of the seriousness of the harms, we believe it is appropriate for the Home Secretary to have input into the design of the codes of practice.

Finally, the hon. Lady has my assurance that we will continue to work with the Scottish Government. I have already had a very productive conversation with her colleague in the Scottish Government, Kate Forbes. We will seek to take forward that co-operation as we develop the proposals.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on producing something that clearly binds all parts of the House together. There is much to be welcomed. I want to make two quick points. First, at the heart of the problem is the business model for such businesses. Because they are so light touch and therefore bear no responsibility for what they publish, they have in a sense been able to build up companies on the cheap. Making them publishers of their content is the quickest way to achieve our No. 1 purpose, which is to break up what Adam Smith in “The Wealth of Nations” called “cartelling”. May I direct the Secretary of State, as he looks at the legal constraints, to the idea that such businesses should be responsible, as publishers are, for the content on their websites? That would radically change everything. Has he had conversations with his counterparts in the United States to see whether there is commonality of purpose in what he requests?

Jeremy Wright: The argument about whether such businesses are publishers or platforms takes up a great deal of time, and not necessarily to great purpose. It is better to ask how we can keep the focus on ensuring that online platforms take responsibility for what they do. We believe that the duty of care is the right method. It will not be sustainable any longer for online companies to say, “We have no responsibility for the harms that may appear on our platforms.” They will instead be required—by law if necessary—to look at what they can do to keep their users safe in any reasonably practicable way they can. If they do not do that, they will find that the regulator imposes sanctions upon them. That seems the right way forward.

I said earlier that it is appropriate for the United Kingdom to lead on this matter, and we should be proud that we are doing so, but I hope that other countries, including the United States, will see how we are approaching common challenges that the United States faces, too, and will seek to adopt similar proposals.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Forty or 50 years ago, the tobacco industry was largely responsible for driving up cancer in our country. It took the Department of Health many years to start to regulate what was going on in the industry and deal with it on behalf of

[Mr David Lammy]

the taxpayer. It is clear from looking at some drill music and its relationship with knife crime and gang culture, and self-harm among young people, that mental ill health is being driven by much of this social media. Will the Secretary of State say something about the intersection between the Department of Health and Social Care, the chief medical officer and the new regulator?

Jeremy Wright: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point. As he will recognise, the White Paper deals with some of the harms that he mentions—serious violence and self-harm, in particular. It is right that all of government is behind the strategy. It is important that we ensure that the links between what this regulator does, what the health service does and what many other bodies within and outside Government do are sustained.

On social media, we all recognise that we cannot put the genie back in the bottle. Social media will continue to be a significant element in the lives of young people, in particular, with all the challenges to their mental health that we know it brings. Those who promote platforms for the kind of user-generated interaction that we are concerned with in this White Paper must accept that they can do something about some of the harmful material on those platforms. If they choose to do so, they will have nothing to fear from our proposals; if they choose not to, they will find that consequences follow.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I am sure many of my constituents in Truro and Falmouth will welcome these important measures. How can the Government ensure that the regulator is able to compete with the tech giants in attracting the best talent to keep pace with rapid technological change?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It will be a challenge to ensure that the regulator employs people of sufficient experience and ability, who can get to grips with the challenges we will expect it to confront. A linked challenge is that we must determine, in the process of designing the regulator, what rules we believe there should be about the progress that employees from the industry can make to and from it. That can be argued both ways. My hon. Friend puts her finger on one of the great design challenges, and we shall pursue it with vigour.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): On behalf of my party, I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. We need regulation in this area, but regulation alone cannot address issues such as the impact on the emotional development of children and young people. Schools must be able to educate about social harm, and parents must be empowered to support their children. What will the Secretary of State do with other Departments to ensure that that sort of action takes place?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady is right. She has heard me refer to education—I mean that in the broadest sense—for adults, as well as for children. She will know that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary has recently made changes to relationships education in our schools. It is important that understanding the online world—digital literacy—is a key part of the education that we give all our young people. They now cannot manage without it.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): On the question of online addiction, the focus tends to be on the horrors of addiction to online gambling, but the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee is hearing evidence about the problems associated with addiction to online gaming. Will the Secretary of State give that as much attention as gambling when he looks at the legislative part of this?

Jeremy Wright: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. As he knows from the inquiries that he and his colleagues have been pursuing, there is considerable overlap between the two. We all need to turn our attention to the opportunities to engage in activity that looks very much like gambling within a gaming context.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I welcome much of what is in the White Paper, but it does not address the serious concerns that our Select Committee raised about the need for transparency in relation to political advertising and campaigning, which has been the source of much disinformation on social media. It is vital that electoral law is brought up to date as soon as possible, and the possibility of an early general election or a confirmatory referendum makes that even more urgent. Will the Secretary of State be a bit more specific and tell us when the Cabinet Office will publish its proposals?

Jeremy Wright: I cannot give the hon. Lady a date today, but it is imminent. When she sees that document, she will see that it complements what the Online Harms White Paper is designed to do. There is a huge amount to be discussed in relation to the challenges that the online world brings us. If I tried to put all of them in one document, it would have become pretty unwieldy. This White Paper is designed to deal with the harms that are set out within it, and the Cabinet Office documents will, I hope, deal with many of the points that she is concerned about.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the White Paper and the fact that it has taken on board many of the recommendations of the DCMS Committee inquiry, which revealed some spine-chilling evidence about what is going on and how we are being manipulated. One of the keys is education, and I welcome the strategy for that. People need to know how vulnerable they are and how to distinguish truth from non-truth. Will the Secretary of State expand a bit more on the strategy and how we will make it effective?

Jeremy Wright: As my hon. Friend says, the Select Committee helpfully focused on that area. We want the regulator to take responsibility for ensuring that more of this happens. It will, of course, be able to make use of the resources available to it to pursue education for all. We need to ensure that we do not just pursue education in a school context but give every member of our society the skills and capabilities they require to make sense of the online world. Some of that can be described in an over-technical way. Frankly, we sometimes require greater scepticism and less trust about what we see online so we can apply our critical faculties to it, but even if we do that, greater visibility is required. The point that the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) made about political advertising is right. We must ensure that we have the greatest possible visibility to add to our scepticism.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the White Paper and on the approach he has taken. This is not about censorship; it is about encouraging responsibility. Many of the recommendations of our Select Committee reports are echoed in the White Paper. In our reports, we left the identity of the new independent regulator unspecified. There will be a consensus that we should try to build on tried and trusted structures, rather than create a new, possibly overlapping and competing public body. In that respect, I draw attention to the growing work between Ofcom, the Information Commissioner's Office and, where necessary, law enforcement. I encourage the people who respond to the consultation and the Secretary of State, as he takes it forward, to adopt a pragmatic approach.

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I will certainly do that. I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman says about the White Paper. As he will recognise, we have said already that we think freedom of speech is one of the issues that the regulator should concern itself with. Like him, I do not believe that there is any necessary conflict between the promotion of freedom of speech and the protection of the most vulnerable members of our society from some of the most pernicious harms.

On the identity of the regulator, the hon. Gentleman is right that this could become a congested space. He will see in the White Paper that, despite the fact that, initially at least, we have asked people to tell us what they think about the two possibilities as they stand—either a new regulator or the extension of the powers of an existing regulator—we have also envisaged a somewhat more comprehensive look at the way in which the regulatory structures currently operate.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): As a former journalist and broadcaster, I am used to being identified as the source of whatever I wrote, along with my colleagues, but trolling has the most appalling effect on many of our young and indeed—dare I say it—on many MPs who are subjected to it. Has my right hon. and learned Friend done anything about that, and can anything be done—I am afraid I am not an expert in this field—to end this and to identify those who put stuff online, because if they have nothing to hide, why can they not be identified?

Jeremy Wright: I understand my hon. Friend's point. Abuse and intimidation are of course covered in this White Paper, and it is important that online platforms do what they can to minimise that kind of activity. As he will recognise, harassment and intimidation can be criminal offences. Where they are or may be criminal offences, powers already exist to seek to identify those who may be responsible, and we should be making full use of them.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on suicide and self-harm prevention, I welcome today's online harms paper as a significant step towards protecting the most vulnerable young people, but the proof will be in the implementation, and a major challenge is that much of the damaging content is hosted outside the UK. What will the Government be doing to scale up their plans and to drive forward global change to protect young vulnerable people?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and, indeed, the APPG for its work. I hope she will have the chance, with her colleagues, to look carefully at what we propose, respond to the consultation and give us her views.

On what the hon. Lady says about some of this content being hosted outside the UK, the important point is that companies that offer services to UK citizens will be within scope of these proposals. There is an enforcement challenge for some of the sanctions we have set out, but it is worth keeping in mind that some 85% or so of the traffic we are concerned about comes through platforms that have a significant corporate presence in the United Kingdom. That does give us a purchase on them, and it is important that we make use of it. I would also say that some of the other sanctions we are considering, including ISP blocking—although it would never be used except in the most extreme circumstances, and it does have technical challenges—would be applicable even to platforms that do not have a corporate presence in the UK.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This is a great cross-party cause. I strongly support what the Secretary of State has said about extending the duty of care to social media firms. He will know that, some time ago, I advocated something similar in relation to the extension of the duty of care on teachers and youth workers to those who are coaching or training under-18-year-olds, particularly driving instructors or sports coaches, where there are one-on-one relationships with real child-grooming risks. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has now taken this up as part of its "Close the Loophole" campaign. What can my right hon. and learned Friend do about this duty of care issue as well?

Jeremy Wright: That was a brave attempt to stretch the concept of online harms a very long way. I simply say to my hon. Friend that we are working on it.

Mr Speaker: Well, I hope the hon. Gentleman feels that his elasticity has been suitably rewarded.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): One of the problems is anonymity, because people seem to feel able to write on social media things that they would never think of saying to another person or that they would never write if their name was revealed. Yet I have known instances, for my constituents and for myself personally, when it has taken months and months for the police to be able to get the identity of individuals from the internet companies, even when serious violence has been threatened. When are these companies going to do something about the anonymity, make sure that state actors from elsewhere, such as Russia and China, stop interfering in our political processes in this country, and clean up their act?

Jeremy Wright: On anonymity, as the hon. Gentleman has heard me say and as he recognises, there are powers available; the issue is how quickly they can be used. When we come to consider a duty of care, it seems to me and my colleagues that one of the advantages of the duty of care approach is that it should bring about a change of attitude across a whole range of activities among the online companies. It will no longer be sufficient for online companies to say, "Well, we've met this rule or that rule." Instead, they must demonstrate to a

[Jeremy Wright]

regulator that they are doing all they reasonably can to keep their users safe, and that includes being safe from some of the activities the hon. Gentleman has in mind. I do not promise that any of this will be a magic bullet or that things will be transformed overnight, but I do think that the approach we are setting out will start to change the culture of these companies and start to make them think about how they meet their responsibilities more effectively.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The briefing for this statement mentions, correctly, that all five terrorist attacks in the UK during 2017 had an online element, and online terrorist content remains a feature of contemporary radicalisation. Given that some of these companies have created applications with end-to-end encryption that they claim they cannot get into themselves, let alone the security services being able to get into them, what will these measures do to prevent online harm being done through these inaccessible applications?

Jeremy Wright: My right hon. Friend identifies one of the most troublesome aspects of online harm—that encryption is extraordinarily difficult for us to wrestle with. That is of course because there are advantages to encryption, and we use it all the time in our daily lives, but he is right that those who choose to use it for criminal purposes must also be challenged. In relation to this White Paper, I would say to him that harms at the top end of the seriousness spectrum, including the promotion of terrorism, will receive the greatest possible attention from the regulator, and our expectations from the Government will also be higher, hence the Home Secretary's close interest in the way in which codes of practice are developed, so that online companies are doing their utmost to ensure that this kind of behaviour is challenged.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Catfishing is the theft of a person's identity in order to sexually exploit vulnerable people on social media platforms. Of course we must help people become more resilient in relation to online grooming, but we also need to change the behaviour of those who exploit others. Has the Secretary of State had any discussions with the Home Secretary about making catfishing a criminal offence?

Jeremy Wright: I have had no specific conversation with the Home Secretary on exactly that point, although the hon. Lady will recognise, when she has a chance to look at it, that the White Paper refers specifically to catfishing. If these are offences of fraud and misrepresentation, they may already be on the statute book, so it is worth looking at what the overlaps might be. However, I will take away what she says and make sure we discuss it with our colleagues in the Home Office.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for this report. The recommendations are very much in line with the thoughts of the Science and Technology Committee inquiry. I am remembering last November, when 100 women MPs from 100 different countries met in this Chamber, and time and again we heard how the abuse that women politicians get is hampering them in doing their jobs and is a direct

attack on democracy. They were looking to the UK to take global leadership, so I thank the Secretary of State for taking that leadership. Will he confirm that the duty of care is not censorship or curtailing freedom of the press, but that it will help to protect democracy as well as individuals?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I can confirm that. It is important to repeat that this is a process that we believe is necessary to level the playing field. These are abuses that, if they were happening in any other environment, would be controlled, and it is important that we do the same online. The point my hon. Friend makes about the abuse that female politicians have to endure very much echoes the point made by the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who speaks for the Scottish National party, and she is right. Of course, it is not just politicians—female journalists and others in public life have to endure the same. It is unacceptable and it must stop.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to see that the Secretary of State and the Home Secretary appear to have listened to many of the concerns raised by the Home Affairs Committee, including by me and the Chair, about the failure of social media companies to deal with online extremist and terrorist content. I look forward to action on that, but may I press the Secretary of State further on the integrity of our elections, our referendums and, indeed, our democracy on a day-to-day basis? Particularly in the light of the revelations in *The Guardian* last week about the millions in dark money that is being spent on advertising to influence votes going on at this very moment and to whip up hatred against Members of this House, does he not agree that we need action today, rather than to wait months for that to come?

Jeremy Wright: I certainly hope the hon. Gentleman will not have to wait months. He raises fair concerns, and I have indicated that the Government are not blind to them. This particular White Paper does not deal with that subject, but the Government will produce very shortly a document that does.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Of course, it is not just the tech giants that are active in the digital space; it is also our local papers. The *Redditch Standard* and the *Redditch Advertiser*, for example, do a fantastic job of holding us local politicians to account. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the welcome measures in the White Paper will not affect the ability of our small local papers, which do not have a massive resource base, to do their job?

Jeremy Wright: I can confirm that. We are concerned here with user-generated content, not with the activities of journalists or their editors. I would go further and say that it seems to me that the press—both local and national—and recognised journalists who do a good job of producing authoritative, sourced work are part of the solution, not part of the problem, particularly to the disinformation that has been identified across the House as one of the fundamental harms we are concerned about.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am grateful for advance sight of the statement. I welcome the principles of the White Paper, and particularly the

establishment of a statutory duty of care to users, but I note the proposal for codes of practice that are not compulsory. Is there not a risk that companies will be allowed to fulfil the duty of care as they see fit? How will the effectiveness of the alternative approaches that companies are allowed to take be evaluated, and how will the regulator sanction companies that fail to abide by their own policies?

Jeremy Wright: I think there are two points worth making in response to the right hon. Lady. First, how well the platforms hold to their own terms and conditions may well give the regulator a good indication of how well they are complying with their overarching duty of care. Secondly, she is right that the White Paper envisages that a platform might say to a regulator, “We don’t wish to follow the codes of practice,” but if a platform chooses that path, it must be able to demonstrate to the regulator that the approach it takes instead is at least as effective in dealing with online harms as the codes of practice would have been. Of course, if the platform did not succeed in persuading the regulator that it had done that, the overarching duty of care would continue to apply to it. The duty does not rely on the codes of practice for its ongoing effectiveness.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Like many families in south Somerset, I have been concerned about what exposure my children might have to various things online, so I welcome the look that is being taken at this issue. What are we going to do to try to stay ahead of new technologies that are able very efficiently to impersonate so that we can take action in advance? Are we looking at revising the legal framework around harassment and malicious communications to take account of that?

Jeremy Wright: The answer to my hon. Friend’s second question is yes. The Law Commission is looking now at exactly how we may refresh the law on online harassment. On his first question, I think he refers to what are commonly described as deepfakes, which are technologically very challenging. As I said earlier, it is important that the process we suggest encourages online platforms to use technology to provide solutions as well as to recognise problems. We expect that, as technology develops to create deepfakes, so should technology develop to help identify them. This duty of care will put the onus on online platforms to do just that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the White Paper, but I warn the Secretary of State that he has a big, tough fight on his hands. These people are wealthy, they are well organised and they will fight back. They also have interfaces. I learned about this kind of danger in 2012, when Issenberg wrote “The Victory Lab”. He predicted much of what was going to happen in politics, but at that time the offline was solely influencing the online, so the data manipulation models were coming from financial institutions—particularly the banks. Will the Secretary of State look broadly at what is going on? Yes, some of it is online, but it has real links with data collectors in other sectors.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support. He makes a fair point. He is of course right that there will be opposition to what is proposed, but it is worth noting that online companies, including Facebook, have recognised that forms of regulation are

inevitable, and we shall expect them to co-operate in the design of these processes. If they choose not to, they will find that we shall regulate anyway.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Over the past 20 years, the thrust of children’s legislation has been to place a duty on public agencies to co-operate in the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable children, yet no such duty exists for social media companies. In that time, social media companies, using complicated algorithms, have become exceedingly skilful at trying to persuade me that I need to buy essential products that I never knew I could not live without. Will the duty of care require those companies proactively to use algorithms and artificial intelligence not only to block harmful sites in the first place, but to flag up vulnerable users who search for terms such as “kill myself” and clearly harmful websites so they are detected and helped?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is right that we should be particularly concerned with the most vulnerable in our society—especially children. The way we envisage the duty of care operating is that online companies should do all they reasonably can to keep their users safe. The greater the user’s vulnerability, the more care they should take to do so. It follows that, in relation to children who may be using those services—of course, this will apply particularly to services that are attractive to children—there will be a greater onus on those responsible to act. We want to see a regulator pay close attention to what has been done—proactively, not simply reactively—to ensure that that harm can be avoided, whether by the use of algorithms or by other methods. The onus will be very clearly on those who provide the service to satisfy the regulator that they are doing all they can. If they are not, the consequences I described earlier can follow.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on bringing forward the White Paper. It is certainly a step in the right direction. However, I echo the disappointment that a number of my colleagues have expressed about its relationship with the electoral reform process, and particularly the issue of political disinformation, which is penetrating social media so avidly. The Secretary of State mentioned that cultural change is needed. Does he have a sense of optimism about that from his conversations and dealings with social media platforms? If his optimism is limited, what pressure does he hope to apply with international partners?

Jeremy Wright: The straight answer to the hon. Lady’s question about my level of optimism is that it is limited but it exists. It is probably necessary for us all to recognise that the online companies are making progress in the right direction, but not fast enough. We need to take action ourselves to ensure that the proper protections are in place for our citizens. As she says, we need a cultural change. We in the United Kingdom have every reason to act first and to be proud of doing so, but we must ensure—we certainly intend to do so—that we explain to our international colleagues the way we are approaching this, in the expectation and hope that, as they face similar challenges, they will want to take note of the way we have approached these subjects and approach them in a very similar way. I reassure her that the international conversation will continue.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): As a parent, I of course want my children to be safe on the web, but as a civil libertarian, I want to ensure free speech. The Secretary of State spoke about the need to be sceptical and about challenging the perceived truth. People do not trust Governments, for very good reasons. With 194 other jurisdictions around the world, how does he envisage that important balance being struck through this White Paper?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with my hon. Friend that that is indeed the balance to be struck. I hope that I can reassure him that it is our intention to do so and that we believe that free speech and safety online are not mutually exclusive. We can do both; we must do both. That is what the White Paper intends to do. As he says, it simply would not be right for Government to seek to determine the answers to the questions that we are concerned with. There must be an independent regulator to do so. It must be properly funded and must be properly robust in the opportunities that it has to hold online companies to account.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Having spent 20 years in the tech industry, I can say categorically that the harms that the White Paper begins to address were well identified five or even 10 years ago, but it does nothing to address the growing harms associated with algorithms, artificial intelligence, the internet of things and data dominance. The Secretary of State says that other Departments or consultations will address them but, like the world we live in, those harms are all interconnected. Why is the Secretary of State allowing a piecemeal, ad hoc and at times knee-jerk legislative framework to develop, when what we need is a comprehensive, cross-departmental, evidence-based, forward-looking review of digital rights and responsibilities, so that we can have a regulatory framework fit for the future?

Jeremy Wright: I do not wish to damage the atmosphere of consensus that has helpfully emerged this afternoon, but I have to say that I think that the hon. Lady is completely wrong. What we have set out is exactly designed to deal with the problem that she has identified: that if we are reactive—if we chase harms that emerged some time ago and do not think about harms that are yet to emerge—we will indeed miss the point. However, that is exactly what a duty of care is designed to do. Those who are subject to a duty of care will be obliged not just to look at the harms that they already know about, but to scan the horizon. If they see a harm coming and choose to do nothing about it, they will be answerable for that failure. That is exactly one of the advantages of the duty of care model.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): May I congratulate the Secretary of State, the digital Minister and all stakeholders on the development of an excellent White Paper? Not surprisingly, already there have been some criticisms of the potential impact on freedom of speech, but does the Secretary of State agree that there is a world of difference between online banter and abuse and harassment, between expressing an opinion and promulgating disinformation, and between expressing a belief and spreading hatred and terrorist propaganda? In order to ensure that everyone understands those

differences, in particular our children, will some of the money raised through a digital levy or similar be used to finance education and awareness?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he says and, if I may say so, his help and his contribution during his time in the Department. I am privileged to lead in developing this piece of work; he deserves a share of the credit too, and he is right. This is not a challenge to freedom of speech. As we were discussing earlier, if we do not make the online environment safer for everyone, whoever they are, we will be damaging freedom of speech, not enhancing it. It is important that we all recognise that this is a proposal to apply the same levels of activity, control and restriction to the online world that already exist everywhere else. Our freedom of speech thrives well in this place and elsewhere within the confines of the law. The same will be true online.

In relation to my hon. Friend's point about education and how it might be funded, it will of course be open to the regulator—we will encourage it to consider this—to spend some of its revenue on education, which we think is a key component of the White Paper.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): A vast number and variety of forms of behaviour that are quite properly illegal offline are entirely legal or unregulated online, which effectively makes parts of the internet a kind of lawless wild west, from fake cures for cancer to fake news and the bots that make it, and from harvesting of personal data to its unfettered exploitation for commercial gain. Does the Secretary of State agree that the entire online world needs a thorough review and is well overdue for regulation, so that it is put on a sure legal footing to take us into the future? Will he commit to looking at the full range of online harms?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady will see that there is a fairly extensive list of online harms in the White Paper already, and we do not regard it as exhaustive. As she heard me say to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), we think it is important that the process should be able to deal with new harms as they emerge. However, she will recognise that it is important to ensure that we preserve what is good and special about the internet—the capacity for people to come up with new ideas, to have discussion and to have a free flow and exchange—while ensuring that the harms that she rightly points to are controlled. That is exactly what the White Paper seeks to do. We do not, as I have said, believe that everything in it will yet be perfect, but it is important that she and others contribute to the process over the next period of consultation and make it better.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I very much welcome the statement, but returning to the earlier question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), does the Secretary of State accept that if we are not clear about the extent to which the new duty of care impacts on the issue of publisher versus platform, the courts will make that interpretation for us?

Jeremy Wright: Harking back to a former life, in my experience there is always a risk of court involvement, but we should seek to be as clear as possible about the

responsibilities of online companies. Whatever we choose to call them—platform, publisher or something else—it is their responsibilities and what they are engaged in doing that matter. That is what we are seeking to achieve, and once we have defined that with clarity, the necessary powers will need to be available to a regulator to deal with when that does not happen.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): This is an important White Paper; greater online regulation is long overdue. As the Secretary of State said, over 8,000 sexual offences against children with an online element were reported in 2017, and the tragic massacre in New Zealand showed just how quickly illegal, terrorist and extreme content can spread, so is publication by the Home Office of interim codes of practice for terrorist content and online abuse later this year soon enough or strong enough?

Jeremy Wright: We think it is important to get those codes of practice right; therefore, it would not be feasible to produce them overnight. However, the hon. Lady makes a fair point, which is that we should not be waiting for these measures to be taken to see an improvement in the behaviour of online platforms. Online companies will be able to see the nature of the regulation that will come—they will also hear from this Chamber the support that exists for this kind of approach—so they will need to start to change their behaviour now. That is because when a regulator starts its work, it will want to know not just whether the online company has behaved itself for a week but for how long it has had in place the practices and procedures that we and the regulator will expect to show that it is doing its best to keep its users safe from harm.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Mandy Rose Jones, who founded the Empowered Woman Project, has been campaigning against online advertising of harmful rapid weight loss products, which are often given legitimacy when they are endorsed by celebrities and Instagram influencers. Will that be covered by the UK Government's proposals?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady will recognise that there are a number of ways in which we might approach the problem that she describes, but the process that we are looking at relates to user-generated content, not necessarily commercial activities. I will have a look at what she says and perhaps write to her about how we might expect the White Paper to help.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Offensive Weapons Public Bill Committee heard that some weapons that cannot lawfully be sold in the UK can readily be bought online on platforms such as eBay and Amazon. The Minister, in answering that debate, referred to the forthcoming White Paper. How will the proposals tackle this particular online harm?

Jeremy Wright: The right hon. Gentleman will see among the list of harms exactly this type of activity. It is important that we place the obligation on those who operate online platforms to take their responsibilities seriously. I stress that we are predominantly interested in user-generated content, not so much the sales platforms, but he will see what is said in the White Paper. We will

be grateful for his input on where he thinks we might develop ideas. I hope he will choose to respond to the consultation accordingly.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The Secretary of State might be aware that I have been meeting the Minister for suicide prevention, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), to discuss my deep concern and upset over the rising number of suicides in my constituency. Just last week, there were thousands of posts under the hashtag “suicide” on Instagram. What can the White Paper do to address that?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. She will see in the White Paper that we think the prohibition of material that promotes suicide is exactly something that the online platforms should concern themselves with. They need to think why it is that in some cases when people enter certain search terms what comes up is material promoting suicide, rather than advice and guidance on what could be done to help. That is exactly the kind of action we will expect online companies to take. If they do not, it will be hard for them to persuade the regulator that they are doing all they reasonably can to keep their users safe.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made a very important point about the damaging effect anonymity and pseudonyms can have on social media platforms, particularly social media monopolies such as Twitter and Facebook. However, the Secretary of State was quite vague in his response and seemed to hope more than expect that their policies might change. What consultations has he had with the police on how policies and enforcement need to change to tackle the damage caused by anonymous trolls effectively and efficiently?

Jeremy Wright: There is no vagueness here. We know what we are dealing with, and both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) have identified the issue. It is not a lack of powers; it is how quickly those powers can be used. I can assure him that the Government are already in conversation with the law enforcement authorities and the online platforms about how that can be done more quickly.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: A short while ago the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) was keen to favour the House with his dulcet tones. Has he lost the appetite? We want to hear from the fella. [*Interruption.*] I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for his personal commitment to change, which is very obvious to this House. The number of children contacting ChildLine in the past year rose by 30%, due in large part to anxiety caused by cyber-bullying and the pressure of social media. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to target this specific area of online harm, and how does he intend to do that?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman because he gives me a chance to pay tribute to ChildLine. I was at its London centre last week. Those who volunteer

[Jeremy Wright]

and those who work for it professionally do remarkable work to help our young people deal with some of the challenges of our modern existence. He is right that cyber-bullying is particularly pernicious; it does not go away and it happens to young people whether they are at school or not. It is having a serious effect on their mental health. I hope that he will see in the White Paper, and what will follow it, a clear commitment to say to online platforms that they must do all they can to protect users from this kind of abuse. We do not expect anything unreasonable and we do not expect anything impossible, but where they can address this issue they must.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Last week, the Minister for Security and Economic Crime informed the Defence Committee that 43% of the terrorist threat in the UK currently comes from far-right groups who find each other on the internet and meet in enclosed chat rooms in encrypted space. They then come on to the internet to spread fear and intimidation among people who are tackling and pushing back against their activities. Will the Secretary of State talk to the Security Minister to ensure that the proposed legislation is able to deal with the threat from the far right?

Jeremy Wright: The security Minister and I have discussed the White Paper and we will do so again in view of the hon. Lady's specific comments.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This is as much about morality as it is about technology. As the digital and physical worlds get ever closer and more blurred, it is important that we have consistency right across the board. I am sure we can all agree that the vast majority of issues we are talking about should have no place online or in the real world, but what about the issues on which there is a difference of opinion? Who will be the arbiter, and what role will this place have in discussing whether the threshold of harm has been met?

Jeremy Wright: I hope this House will have a role not just in holding the regulator to account but in the design of codes of practice. We will consult on, among other things, how that might be done. We look forward to the hon. Gentleman's contribution to that process. It is of course worth saying—the hon. Gentleman and others have expressed a concern—how judgments on individual pieces of content might be made. It is much more likely, in my view, that the regulator will be deciding whether or not the systems that an online platform puts in place are adequate or not in protecting their users from harm, than it is that the online regulator will be making a judgment on individual pieces of content. One only has to think about the sheer volume of material being considered to realise how impractical it would be for the online regulator to decide in each and every instance. So this is really about whether online companies have in place systems to keep their users safe in the majority of cases. The regulator will have to determine that when it looks into the matter and speaks to online companies individually.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned the Furman review earlier. The White Paper references it, but does not take a view on some of

its recommendations. Does the Secretary of State agree that getting more control for individuals over their personal data, so that they control where it is stored, would alter the balance of power between individuals and tech companies? That would have a range of benefits, including tackling internet harms.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman will recognise, because he is a fair man, that the Furman review was produced only in the past few weeks, and it is important that the Government take the time to look properly at its conclusions. He is right, however, that one of the significant aspects that Professor Furman and his panel picked up on was the potential advantage of users having more control over their data and the impact that that might have on the competition questions he was concerning himself with. The hon. Gentleman has my assurance that we will look carefully at the recommendations and respond to them fully.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for an excellent White Paper. I am extremely pleased that a regulator will be taking things forward. Only last week, an individual pled guilty to sending me threatening messages which have had a grave impact on me and my family. What became difficult was understanding the extent of the abuse, because a victim is blocked very quickly and pages are closed down. What more can be done to allow the police to access closed pages and blocked accounts?

Jeremy Wright: I am very sorry to hear about what has happened to the hon. Lady. As she knows and as others have said, she is sadly not alone. It is important that we consider what online platforms can do. As I have said, closed groups and encrypted communications are a particular challenge. None the less, we think that online companies should do everything they can, with the restrictions that apply to encrypted communications, to keep their users as safe as they possibly can. The regulator will be entitled to ask, as it is entitled to ask in relation to other matters, whether the platform really is doing everything it could. If it is not, there will be consequences.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I was delighted when I got to page 26 of the White Paper to read the phrase “designed addiction”. My heart sank, however, when I got to “future action” and it talked about setting: “the right expectations of companies to design their products in safe ways”

and to

“set clear expectations for companies to prevent harm to their users.”

If we have recognised designed addiction, has the time not come to legislate and stop those companies?

Jeremy Wright: When I visited the west coast to discuss these matters with a number of online companies, I had the privilege of meeting the inventor of the infinite scroll. He was, I am pleased to report, suitably apologetic. The hon. Gentleman is right. There are a certain number of technological responses that we might expect online platforms to adopt to deal with some of the harms we will expect them to tackle. As I have said, that will be a significant part of what the regulator should do to encourage those technological developments and ensure they are widely implemented.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's paper; I would argue that it is long overdue. He may be aware that last week, and three weeks ago, I launched a report by the all-party parliamentary group on social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing. The report was about social media and its impact on young people. Many of its recommendations are in the White Paper, and I genuinely welcome that. One that is not is a 0.5% levy on social media companies' profits, which could go into a social media health alliance. One thing that we heard during our inquiry from clinicians and young people was that we needed far more research into the impact of social media on mental health. Many individual areas of research need to be collated so that we can educate, inform and protect our young people as technology advances.

Jeremy Wright: I agree, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his work and that of his colleagues. I hope that the House recognises that within the White Paper there are contributions from a large number of Members of the House. That is as it should be, because this is a shared challenge that we must address together. I agree with the hon. Gentleman on research. It is important that we understand these problems properly, and we will do all that we can to encourage that research to take place.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We will come to points of order in due course. I await the hon. Gentleman's point of order with eager anticipation, as will the House.

Business of the House

6.41 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I should like to inform the House that in the event that the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 5) Bill receives Royal Assent today, the House may be expected to approve a motion relating to section 1 of the Bill to seek an extension of the period specified in article 50(3) of the treaty on European Union. I will make further business statements as necessary this week at the earliest opportunity.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for advance sight of the statement. I have four quick questions. When is the motion likely to be tabled? How long will the Government give for the debate? Will the Government support the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 5) Bill? If so, will it definitely receive Royal Assent tonight?

Andrea Leadsom: The motion will be tabled later this evening. As the hon. Lady will be aware, if Lords amendments come back, the House will consider them later this evening, in line with the Bill. If the debate is brought forward tomorrow—that is subject to the Bill receiving Royal Assent tonight—it is not intended that the motion will be with a business of the House motion. Therefore, as a proceeding under an Act, the debate would be subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 16, so the debate will last for 90 minutes.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Bill currently going through the House of Lords is the biggest dog's dinner of any Bill we have seen in recent times? Are the Government opposed to the Bill? Will they do everything to defeat it?

Andrea Leadsom: I entirely agree that it is a huge dog's dinner. As I mentioned to colleagues when we were looking at the business of the House motion, the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017—the Act to trigger article 50—had two clauses, containing only 58 words. It was debated for five full days in this Chamber. It seems inconceivable that Parliament looked at this Bill for the first time last Tuesday and has had just a few hours of debate across both Houses.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is not so much a dog's dinner as a dog's Brexit. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Come on, that was all right. The Government are simply managing this on a day-to-day, crisis management basis. No one has a clue what the business will look like tomorrow afternoon, far less what it will look like at the end of the week. All strength to the guys in ermine down the corridor, who have stuck diligently to the task and managed to get the Bill through their House. They are currently adjourned for pleasure—I am certain they will be enjoying that pleasure—but they will get back to dealing with the Bill, and the Government will be obliged to come back tomorrow within the strictures of the Bill that has been passed by this House and will be passed by the House of Lords.

I have a couple of questions. Will debate of the motion take precedence over all Government business tomorrow? Why is only one and a half hours given for consideration, given that there are likely to be a number of amendments coming back from the House of Lords?

[Pete Wishart]

Will the Leader of the House take this opportunity to remind all her right hon. and hon. Friends on the Back Benches that there is no more opportunity to vote down the Bill; all we can consider is amendments put to us by the House of Lords?

Will the Leader of the House say something about what will happen for the rest of the week? For example, will we sit on Friday? Will we have indicative votes at some point this week? Will we hear about what has been compiled by this Labour-Tory Brexit blame sharing? Will we hear anything on any of those issues in the next few days? Can we get to some semblance of how we do business in the House? This really is a dog's Brexit.

Andrea Leadsom: I fear that the hon. Gentleman might be insulting me somewhat as a keen Brexiteer. He is not being consistent, because he usually likes to stand there and insult the other place, talking about how the Lords should be gone, abolished and reduced, yet now, because they are giving him the answer he wants, he is praising them. That is not consistent. It is rather like his approach to referendums: he ignores those he does not like and insists on upholding those he does.

The hon. Gentleman asks whether the motion relating to the Bill currently in the other place would take precedence tomorrow over other business. I sincerely expect not. He asks about the rest of the week. He knows that I have already announced that business, and I have also made it clear that whether we need to sit on Friday will be a decision to make once we see the results of the European Council. I will always seek to give the House as much notice as possible.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that at all stages we will continue to oppose the Bill and that the Government oppose any amendments in process? Does she not agree that there is a distinct irony in that the other place has spent what is now two days debating the Bill while we ended up with a tiny amount of time and did not even debate Report or Third Reading? That is a travesty for the Chamber that is meant to be the democratic Chamber, with the other one the unelected Chamber.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right that it should be for this House to make key decisions, yet here we have the unelected House making play with the Bill, which is absolutely unconventional for the procedures of this Parliament. Despite the Government's grave misgivings about this legislation, for all the reasons we set out in the debate, we will not prevent the Bill being presented for Royal Assent, should it pass both Houses.

It is a well-established convention that the Government have the ability to seek and negotiate international agreements, so the Government will support one amendment in the other place: the royal prerogative amendment. There may be one or two others that seek to ensure that the prerogative is maintained as far as possible.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): This is the first opportunity I have had to raise this, Mr Speaker, but I did let the Leader of the House know. Last Thursday, in exceptional circumstances, the House was forced to

adjourn early, so the debate on the 2019 loan charge, after 16 speakers and 2 hours and 40 minutes of debate, was not afforded a ministerial response. Given the unprecedented circumstances, can we find some way to rectify that position and get a proper ministerial response, please?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue. I fear the House was a bit jealous of all the Cabinet leaks and decided to have one of its own. It was rather a big problem for the House, and the debate had to be adjourned. I have already spoken to my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who is very much looking forward to the resumption of that debate and making his points as well as facilitating those of the Opposition spokesperson. I will announce that as soon as possible.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Why the undue haste? Why are the Government conceding the Bill that they do not want before they have even had the amendments or the votes? Why have they not dug in over the need for a money resolution? It will be enormously expensive to delay the exit from the European Union, given the very high taxes that it imposes on us. Surely the Leader of the House should dig in on that and insist that the normal procedures apply.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right that if passed the Bill would place a severe constraint on the Government's ability to negotiate an extension and reflect the new date in the UK statute book before 12 April. The Government do not accept that the Bill is necessary and deeply regret that the House has taken it upon itself to introduce a Bill that has not had the proper preparation, scrutiny or drafting. It is of grave regret to the Government; none the less, the Government will abide by the law at all times.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Just to clarify precisely what the position of the Leader of the House is, is she saying that the Government do not intend to disagree with the amendment that was put forward in the other place by the former Lord Chief Justice?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will have to forgive me: I am not sure which amendment she is referring to and therefore, I cannot answer that question on behalf of the Government at this moment.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the Leader of the House explain why Her Majesty is being drawn into this matter by being asked to give Royal Assent immediately? Normally, Royal Assent is done at Her Majesty's pleasure. It seems to me wholly inappropriate to be forcing Her Majesty into a political position.

Andrea Leadsom: In raising that matter, my hon. Friend is inviting me to involve the monarchy in this question, and I am afraid that it is not something I am prepared to do, other than to say that Royal Assent is given at the convenience of Her Majesty.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): May I press the Leader of the House on indicative votes? When will we be able to have them, and will they include the option of linking the Prime Minister's deal to a people's vote?

Andrea Leadsom: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Prime Minister has said that she is seeking agreement with an approach that the whole House can support as a way to ensure that we leave the European Union in very short order. However, if the talks that are under way now do not lead to a single, unified approach very soon, the Government will instead look to establish a consensus on a small number of clear options on the future relationship that could be put to the House in a series of votes.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Following the point made by the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), as the loan charge debate was concluded prematurely, is there a procedural question that might be considered by the Leader of the House, and perhaps by you, Mr Speaker, as to whether if House business collapses or ends earlier than expected, a proposed Government motion for business the following working day might be considered at the usual time? We anticipated Government motions and business coming forward late on Friday. It could not happen and I think we ought to have a procedure under which it could.

Andrea Leadsom: I am always keen to look very carefully at proposals made by hon. Members across the House and I will certainly take away my hon. Friend's suggestion. However, what I have discussed with you, Mr Speaker, and my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is that we intend to bring the debate back for resumption. I hope that those who had already spoken in the debate would attend and those who were waiting to speak in it may have the opportunity to do so. Importantly, the Government and Opposition spokespeople will then be able to respond, hopefully giving some closure on that debate to the many people in the country who are very concerned about the matter.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The House of Lords has completed the Committee stage of the Bill and all the amendments carried at the Committee stage in the Lords have been supported by the Government Minister there. Will the right hon. Lady confirm, as the Leader of the House and a Cabinet Minister here in the Commons, that when the amendments come back down the corridor to us later, the Government will follow on from what happened in the Lords and support those amendment?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will know that whipping is a matter for the Whips, and I am not prepared to confirm from the Dispatch Box exactly how Government Members will be voting.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Rumours abound of an ill-advised customs union-based Brexit in talks with the Opposition. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the House would need time to debate the merits and demerits of a customs union in some detail, and is she personally still opposed to a customs union with the European Union?

Andrea Leadsom: What I can say to my right hon. Friend is that any discussion of a new and different proposal would need to come before the House for

careful discussion and consideration. In answer to the second part of his question, I am absolutely opposed to remaining in the European Union's customs union, but if we are to leave the EU in very short order, I think we need to be flexible and find a way forward that the whole House can support.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Leader of the House continues to complain about the Bill, but the bottom line is that the Bill reflects the will of the House and the will of the other place. Is that parliamentary process not far more important than MPs having to turn on the TV to hear the Prime Minister's latest formulations on what she is thinking, instead of her coming to the Dispatch Box?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is not correct that I complain about the Bill. I fundamentally object to it on the grounds that it is totally unconventional for this House. When people vote for a Government at the polling booths, the Government go to form that Government as Her Majesty's Government, and then it is the convention that the Government propose the business, and Parliament scrutinises it, and may amend or reject it. What does not happen—normally, for many, many years—is that those who did not win that general election, who do not form a Government and who do not have the confidence of this House should be putting forward any legislation, and particularly legislation with such significant constitutional implications as this Bill.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I very much support the realistic and pragmatic position currently being taken by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, but I was looking at her letter to President Tusk of 5 April in which she requested an article 50 extension to 30 June. In the letter she said that if she cannot get an agreement with the Opposition, "a series of votes" will be put to establish a position, but clearly that in itself will require the Opposition's support, so could we say that not getting a deal with the Opposition will probably lead to a long delay to article 50?

Andrea Leadsom: We have to consider this step by step. The Prime Minister has said that she wants to seek a way forward that the whole House can support. If that is not possible, she intends to come forward with a small number of options for the House to consider to seek another and perhaps slightly different way forward. It remains our intention to leave the European Union with a deal that both means we leave in line with the decision of the referendum in 2016, and protects our economy, jobs and our security.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Ind): I am very disappointed to hear the tone that the Leader of the House is taking. I think it absolutely demonstrates why we have such a problem here. She fails to acknowledge that the Government have no majority, have not managed to carry this House, do not have the confidence of this House, have spent a great deal of time on anything but the business that we need to deal with, and have been absolutely intransigent. If Members think about the public out there watching this and listening to those responses, which basically seem to condemn this House and the responsible action it has taken, they will see that the public could well hold this House in contempt of our nation if it did not take

[Joan Ryan]

the action it has taken as we face this national crisis. This House is sovereign, and the Government seem to reject that notion at every point and turn.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to say to the right hon. Lady that what she has said is not correct. This Government do have the confidence of the House. They are Her Majesty's Government, and, should the House feel that it does not have confidence in Her Majesty's Government, it should, of course, table a no-confidence motion. It did attempt to do that, and it lost, so—as a matter of fact—this Government do have the confidence of the House.

Let me also say that the Government have, at all times, sought to find a deal that would honour the referendum that was held in 2016 and enable the United Kingdom to leave the European Union in a way that would ensure that we met the will of the people, but would at the same time protect our economy and our security. That is what the Government have sought to do, but what Parliament has then done is reject every attempt to secure a good deal that works for the whole United Kingdom. I am always keen to hear from Members, but it is a fact that this Government carry the confidence of the House, and that Parliament has failed to support the will of the people as expressed in the referendum in 2016.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): This is an abomination of a Bill. It is not a question of what Members of this House should be saying; it is a question of what should be said by the people of this country, to whom we swore that we would leave after two years—and we are not. The Leader of the House now seems to be saying that she is pursuing a soft Brexit. I understand that we are still due to leave on 12 April, this Friday. Would it not be ironic if it were the EU that threw us out, rather than our fulfilling our honourable duty?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is correct: the legal date for us to leave the European Union is indeed this Friday, 12 April. However, he will also be aware that the Bill that is currently being discussed in the other place seeks to change the date of our departure, and that is the substance of the motion that will be discussed tomorrow should the Bill receive Royal Assent tonight.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Rather than the Government's being condemned for being in contempt of the view of the House, should not the House recognise that, in passing the Bill, it is in contempt of the views of the vast majority of people in this country, because they voted to leave? The Bill seeks to undermine the UK's ability to leave the European Union. The Leader of the House should not hang her head in shame for being disdainful to the House of Commons, because she is right to say that the Bill is a constitutional outrage, and also a democratic outrage.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Not only is the Bill against our conventions, but it seeks to subvert the will of the people as expressed in the referendum in 2016. That is a great shame, and it does not do credit to this House.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Instead of trying to do a Ramsay MacDonald in reverse, why does the Prime Minister not just let this country leave the EU on time, at 11 pm on Friday?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Bill that is currently being discussed in the other place seeks to put into law a different date, and to ensure that it is not possible for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union at 11 pm this Friday. That is the fundamental problem that we have before us: the Bill seeks to change the outcome of the referendum by ensuring that the United Kingdom cannot leave the European Union.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): May I remind the Leader of the House that the Government lost their majority at the last election, and are a minority Government supported by a minority party? May I also say to her, with respect, that she should give a straight answer to the question about the Lords amendments, and tell the House which of them she is prepared to support? Let me remind her once again that, through its own amendments, the House has been trying to help the Government to achieve article 50, contrary to what the Government think.

Andrea Leadsom: I can only say to the hon. Gentleman that when the other House finishes its consideration of the Bill, it will come back to this place for further consideration later this evening, and it will then become apparent how all Members vote on amendments made in the other place.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): A majority of my constituents want us to leave the European Union this Friday. Presumably the best way to represent their wishes would be to vote against any extension proposed by the Government.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will, of course, decide how he, as an individual Member of Parliament, wishes to vote. However, let me say again to all Members that the proposal that the Prime Minister negotiated with the European Union over two and a half years seeks to deliver on leaving the European Union while at the same time protecting our economy, protecting jobs and protecting our security relationship with the EU, and I urge them to continue to consider considering it as the right way to leave the EU with a deal.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): May I pursue what was said by the Leader of the House to my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown)? She is clearly unhappy about the Bill. Can she not see that it is owing to the Government's complete mismanagement of the entire Brexit process that the House has wrested control from them by means of the Bill? Will she acknowledge that her party lacks a majority in the House not just because her party is so divided, but because the people of the UK have decided that they do not want the Government to have full control of this process?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady seems to suggest that the ends justify the means. I would never support the introduction of a Bill of this type by the House. If a

Bill of such constitutional significance were introduced by the Government, it would be subjected to extensive consideration. That would include consideration by the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee, which consists of business managers, law officers, territorial Ministers and others. The Committee would test the policy and the handling plans, ensuring good engagement with Members on both sides of the House.

There is a private Member's Bill procedure, which is what the Bill's promoters have sought to use. According to that procedure, the Bill would normally be considered on a sitting Friday, and the process would take place slowly, enabling the Government to check for drafting problems and enabling all colleagues to consult on whether they believe that the outcome would be right. This Bill—following a couple of hours of debate, and with very poor drafting and a great degree of urgency—seeks to challenge the result of the referendum that was held in June 2016. That simply cannot support the hon. Lady's apparent suggestion that the end justifies the means.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I echo my right hon. Friend's comments about the abomination that is this Bill. Let me put it on record that many of us switched our position on meaningful vote 3 to support the Government. That was the limit of our tolerance. We bent over backwards to try to get a deal through the House. I will simply be unable to support the Government if they propose a customs union. Can my right hon. Friend confirm my understanding that that would mean that we would have no independent trade policy, and that it would in fact be Brexit in name only?

Andrea Leadsom: What I can say to my hon. Friend is that the Government intend this country to be able to have its own free trade policy once we have left the European Union. That discussion continues to take place, and I hope we will find a solution that my hon. Friend, and other Members on both sides of the House, will be able to support.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Does the Leader of the House think that the Government, the Opposition or the House understand that a customs union is not a state of frictionless trade? Does she not think that, if that is proposed, we should make time in this place to ensure that there can be that understanding?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has made a good point. I can assure him that if an arrangement can be reached that appears to be able to command a majority in the House, there will be plenty of time for discussion of it.

Points of Order

7.9 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you had any indication of whether any Minister from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is planning to come to the House to make a statement about the seven new members of its Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group who have been appointed? News of the appointment tumbled out on the Twitter account of Lord Bourne, the faith Minister. There is widespread disappointment that only one of those people is a woman, bringing the total to two out of 11. However, one particular individual, Karim Sacoor, was filmed and photographed in the 2015 general election aggressively manhandling me for having the temerity to go up and speak to the then Mayor of London, now the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). I am usually overjoyed at the success of my constituents on the national stage, and I understand the rough and tumble of politics, but is it really appropriate to appoint an individual who thinks it is okay to push and shove Muslim women to a body that wants to tackle Islamophobia? Can you advise me how to make my disappointment known to those on the Treasury Bench?

Mr Speaker: First, I think the hon. Lady has found her own salvation in that respect, because she has registered her discontent very eloquently, and it will be in the *Official Report*. Before I respond further, and I do not need to respond very much, might I just as a precaution establish, although I am reasonably confident of the answer, that there are no active criminal proceedings in the matter to which she refers?

Dr Huq: No, I did not take any action.

Mr Speaker: Very good.

I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me advance notice of her intended, and dare I say attempted, point of order. She does refer to a disturbing matter, but I have to say that it is not a matter of parliamentary procedure on which I can give a ruling. She has, as I have just said, put her concerns on the record. They will have been heard on the Treasury Bench and, indeed, they will doubtless soon be heard by the wider public. The Clerks in the Table Office will also be able to advise the hon. Lady on any further options she might have if she wishes further to pursue the matter. On the question of the appropriateness of the appointment, I would not presume to comment.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Was the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport able to advise you in advance of tabling his White Paper today of how he intends to give territorial effect to it, given that it requires the support of the legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland if we need any law enforcement activities or educational procedures associated with it? The National Crime Agency was clearly delayed in its operation in Northern Ireland for the same reason. We are now potentially going to see the very good provisions that have been outlined today delayed in their operation in Northern Ireland. Can you let Ministers know that it is no longer appropriate for them to table measures that

[*Ian Paisley*]

will have effect in Northern Ireland when there is no power to give them effect there? Can we resolve this issue urgently?

Mr Speaker: What I would say to the hon. Gentleman, to whom I am grateful for his point of order, is that I have been somewhat blindsided on the matter, in that I was not aware of his intention to raise it, about which I make no complaint—it is obviously a matter of earnest preoccupation to him. However, what I mean is that I have not had the chance to take advice, and I am not sure what the appropriate response would be.

What I would say off the top of my head is that, in light of the very genuine concern the hon. Gentleman has expressed, I should have thought that it would be fitting and potentially helpful if the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport were to speak to the hon. Gentleman about this matter and, dare I say, perhaps also to consult the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), who leads his party in this place, in the hope of brokering a solution, which will bring a smile to the face of the hon. Gentleman.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 26 March, I submitted two written questions to the Department for Work and Pensions relating to the number of universal credit work capability decisions that have been appealed and are therefore subject to a tribunal or indeed a court order, asking the Department to respond within 21 days. In addition, I requested the number of “statement of reason” requests pertaining to limited capability that have not been delivered—they have a statutory limit of 14 days.

To both questions, I received the following answer:

“the information requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost”.

These delays have a huge impact on constituents in East Lothian who are awaiting—indeed, some have been stranded for months awaiting—an important appeal date.

The Department’s response is worrying, because it suggests that this information is not easily available, when the Department is in breach of a court order or indeed statute. I therefore seek your advice on what I can do next. Surely it does not require a Member of Parliament to issue a freedom of information request against a Department to get this essential and, I must say, judicial answer.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman might not think it desirable to have to resort to such a device in order to extract the information he seeks, but I was rather imagining, when he said it surely would not be necessary to submit a freedom of information request, that he might have added—almost in New Forest West style—“is it?”, because the answer is that it may be necessary for the hon. Gentleman to adopt that approach. Short of that, what I say to him is that he will find that the Clerks of the Table Office can advise on follow-up questions to probe how much information is actually available. He may find—I cannot say he will—that if he tables a similar inquiry, and probes, he might get more information than has been provided to date.

Secondly, I would say to the hon. Gentleman that any hon. or right hon. Member of this place can approach the Procedure Committee—chaired with great distinction by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker)—if that Member is not satisfied with the Department’s performance in answering parliamentary questions. Thirdly, there are other avenues that a Member can explore for bringing a matter to the Floor of the House, either here, through questioning or debate, or indeed in Westminster Hall.

My last suggestion to the hon. Gentleman, who always has a most amiable manner in his dealings with colleagues, is that he might want to approach the Minister for a direct chat, in the hope that a peaceful resolution of this matter can be achieved. But knowing the hon. Gentleman as I do, I know that his amiability should not be mistaken for weakness or a reluctance to stick to his guns. I feel sure that he will stick to his guns, and the sooner that that is recognised by the people from whom he seeks information, so much the better.

Exiting the European Union (Customs)

7.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): I beg to move,

That the draft Trade in Torture etc. Goods (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 March, be approved.

I am pleased to be able to open this debate on the regulations. These regulations amend provisions of regulation (EU) No. 2019/125 of 16 January 2019 concerning trade in certain goods that could be used for capital punishment, torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The EU regulation divides these goods into three distinct categories. First, I will begin by explaining to the House that the regulation prohibits the import and export of goods that have no practical use other than capital punishment or torture. These goods include, among other things: gallows; guillotines; electric chairs; airtight vaults; electric shock devices intended to be worn on the body; cuffs for restraining human beings that are designed to be anchored to a wall; batons and shields with metal spikes; and whips with barbs, hooks and spikes. These are appalling instruments of torture, and the Government have a clear position that the trade in such goods from the United Kingdom is absolutely unacceptable. Their export and import are prohibited, and the only exception to this rule is if the items are to be displayed publicly in a museum.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What discussions has the Minister had with his EU counterparts, for example, about how we will enforce these regulations when we leave?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. The aim of these regulations is to transpose the existing system, which is reliant on EU law, into purely UK law. However, he rightly identifies the issue of co-operation with other countries in the EU. We will have our own discrete regime. We have no intention of making changes to it. We will be looking to co-operate with our colleagues in the EU—and beyond—in making sure that these appalling goods are not trafficked around the world.

Secondly, the regulation imposes controls on the trade in specified goods that have legitimate uses—for example, in law enforcement—but that also carry a risk of being used for torture. These goods with potential torture application include oversized handcuffs, shackles, gang chains, spit hoods, electric shock dart guns and pepper sprays.

The third category involves those goods listed in annexe IV of the EU regulation. The annexe lists several short-acting and intermediate-acting barbiturate anaesthetic agents such as amobarbital, pentobarbital and secobarbital. These goods have a legitimate use in medicine, in research laboratories and in university chemistry departments, but they have also been approved for use—and, in some countries, actually used—either on their own or as part of a cocktail of drugs for execution by lethal injection. We will not help any country with capital punishment, and we will continue to lobby against and seek to influence countries that continue the practice, with a

view to ending capital punishment. We do not license the export of these barbiturate products to countries that have not abolished the death penalty without an end-user assurance that they will not be used for capital punishment, and we will not do so after EU exit.

All of us will have the immediate reaction that it is terrible that the UK should ever be involved in the trade of any goods that could be used for capital punishment or torture. I am confident that we can all agree that the United Kingdom does not want to be a country that makes its living trading in such possible tools of torture. These goods have been controlled by European Union regulations for well over a decade, and the United Kingdom intends to carry on with those controls in a similar way. Let me reassure the House that exports from this country of such goods have been minimal over the past decade, averaging 10 licences per year, and we do not expect that to change. The types of goods exported under licence include handcuffs for prison service use and pepper sprays for use by the police in places such as the Crown dependencies, Australia and New Zealand. We have also licensed barbiturate anaesthetic agents for medicinal use and laboratory testing. The quantities are low, and the export value is small. We do not envisage any growth in exports of those goods after EU exit.

Let me be clear about the purpose of these amending regulations. In their absence, existing European Union law would not be effective in UK domestic law on the day we exit the European Union, and our ability to control these goods would be undermined. After EU exit, this legislation will enable the Secretary of State to control the export from the UK of the listed goods that could be used for capital punishment, torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. As far as is possible, the legislation will operate as it does now, but controls on the goods will apply when they are exported from the UK rather than from the EU.

I do not believe that UK exporters want to be involved in a trade in torture goods, and I do not believe that these are the sorts of goods that UK businesses want to make, sell or export. Nevertheless, our export controls have an important part to play in promoting and ensuring global security, by controlling the goods that leave our shores. The Government have a responsibility to be prepared for any exit-day scenario, and we need to ensure that these controls continue to function properly. These exit-related regulations are just a part of the necessary legislative building blocks to ensure readiness on exit day.

The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 enables a functioning statute book on exit day by providing Ministers with the tools to deal with deficiencies in domestic law arising as a result of our exit from the European Union. These regulations thus take another step towards completing the legislative part of controlling the export of strategic goods in preparation for a no-deal exit scenario. The Department for International Trade will continue to work to provide detailed advice and guidance about export controls and trade sanctions through EU exit and beyond. If these regulations are no longer required on exit day, we expect to revoke or amend them. Alternatively, commencement could be deferred to the end of an implementation period.

I want to take this opportunity to remind the House that these regulations are solely about preparing for European Union exit and ensuring that we have a

[Graham Stuart]

functioning statute book in any scenario. These amendments must happen because of EU exit, but EU exit is not happening because of these amendments. Parliament needs to ensure that the existing controls remain in place. Negotiations about the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union or the wider world are a separate matter. They play no part in this debate today. Broadly, all the provisions applying to exports from the EU customs territory today will instead apply to exports from the UK. For this reason, the Government have made every effort to provide certainty for businesses and the public wherever possible. There is no new marketing opportunity for the export of the tools of torture.

In August last year, we published a technical notice on export controls that explained our plans for post-EU exit export control licences. We will use our “Notices to Exporters”, which has 20,000 subscribers, to advise and communicate with UK businesses. We have also included EU exit advice in the export control training programme and at the annual export control symposium, as well as giving extensive advice to key sector trade associations.

I hope that the House will work in the interests of the nation to ensure the passage of this legislation, which is essential to ensuring we are prepared for EU exit and that we continue the ban on the trade in torture goods and the control over the trade in goods with the potential for torture application. I commend the motion to the House.

7.26 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The statutory instrument before us today contains extremely important measures to ensure that the United Kingdom has a robust export controls regime in place after Brexit. It is needed to prevent UK exports from being used for torture activities, capital punishment or the suppression of citizens and their human rights in other countries. It is absolutely right that we ensure the continuance of this regime once we leave the European Union. Indeed, such is the seriousness of the matter covered by the draft regulations that we should take every opportunity to review and, where possible, improve our efforts in this area.

The draft regulations are set out in this draft instrument, together with measures voted on a few weeks ago in respect of an additional instrument. The Trade etc. in Dual-Use Items and Firearms etc. (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 were initially integrated into a single draft instrument tabled on 11 February and subsequently withdrawn. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm why the Government withdrew that initial draft and split the measures contained in it. If there was defective drafting, can he confirm that the Government are satisfied that the revised wording properly remedies the defects?

The draft regulations operate to ensure that goods that could be used for the purposes of torture or capital punishment are banned from export and/or import or, where appropriate, that an authorisation must be sought and granted prior to their export. That is entirely right, and it is welcome that the Government have sought to continue the existing EU regime more or less unchanged in a UK-specific context after Brexit. This is by way of a series of amendments to a recent Council regulation

which, as I understand it, has not yet otherwise been incorporated in our domestic statute book. For the most part, as with a number of recent statutory instruments, the draft regulations proposed by the Government seek to ensure that references to the European Union or European Community are replaced by references to the United Kingdom, our customs territory or the Secretary of State.

However, there are amendments whose intent requires clarification, and I will come to those points shortly. Fundamentally, these provisions seek to prevent the trade in goods that may be used for torture or to administer capital punishment. How we treat our citizens, including those who have committed even the most heinous of crimes, reflects the society that we strive to be. In that respect, I am proud that it was a Labour MP who brought about the end of capital punishment in this country. As I have said before, we in the Labour party want to ensure that a robust and rigorous control system is in place in respect of dual-use items, firearms and other sensitive material. That includes any items that may be used for the purposes of torture or capital punishment. Indeed, we have called for a tighter approach to our export controls regime and for the cessation of exports to countries where there is a concern that they will be used to violate international humanitarian law. It is therefore concerning that in 2015 the Government decided to drop explicit references to the Foreign Office’s long-standing commitment to making efforts to encourage the abolition of the death penalty overseas. Although I welcome the Minister’s comments, will he confirm whether the Government have any plans to make subsequent amendments to the draft regulations once the United Kingdom has left the European Union?

Regulation 2(24) amends article 24 of the existing regulations to allow the Secretary of State, by negative resolution, to vary our schedules to add or remove items and procedures, so it is crucial that we understand the Government’s policy intention in this regard. The use of the negative resolution procedure to lift restrictions currently in place is extremely concerning. Will the Minister therefore confirm whether he is satisfied that these measures are sufficient to prevent the UK’s participation in the trade in torture goods or in drugs administered for the purposes of capital punishment, including the transfer of intellectual property within international corporate structures, such that UK-developed products might be reproduced or R&D transferred intragroup for such purposes?

Paragraphs (12) and (17) of regulation 2 remove the requirement to refer decisions made in the past three years by other EU member states in respect of these regulations. It seems entirely sensible to refer to precedents established by other countries, particularly where those countries ostensibly operate the same regime as our own. Perhaps the Minister can clarify whether the Government intend to continue to refer to any such precedents in any future decisions made by the Secretary of State. Indeed, paragraph (12) removes the EU from the list of competent bodies whose findings should be referenced, so I would be grateful if the Minister clarified the Government’s intention in that regard.

Paragraph (17) of regulation 2 removes the obligation of the Commission and member states to develop best practice approaches, alongside paragraph (31), which clearly ends the UK’s participation in the anti-torture co-ordination group. Although the Government might

consider that to be necessary once we have withdrawn from the EU, it would be helpful if he set out how the Government intend to continue dialogue with our international partners, particularly in the EU, on common approaches to controlling torture goods.

Furthermore, paragraphs (14) and (15) of regulation 2 seek to remove references to the national treatment provisions in respect of the trade in leg irons, gang chains and portable electric shock devices. Again, I ask the Minister to put on the record what the Government's intended approach to these measures will be.

Paragraph (32) of regulation 2 omits article 32 of the European regulations, which requires the Commission to publish a periodic report on the impact of these measures every five years and to include proposals for improvement. How do the Government intend to report on these measures in a UK-specific context?

Finally, paragraph (33) of regulation 2 removes the national determination of appropriate penalties provisions. I would be grateful if the Minister also put on the record what the Government's proposed penalties for breaches of these regulations will be.

7.33 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I rise to support the motion, because this subject is close to my heart. One of the inalienable rights that this House has secured in this realm, and indeed on which it has exerted its influence around the world, is the absolute right not to be tortured. We enjoy many rights through the universal declaration of human rights, and indeed through the laws, customs and practice that this kingdom has established over many generations, but most are qualified rights. The right to life, for example, is not an unqualified right; if it were, every doctor would be required always to provide the most invasive surgery and treatment, whatever their patient's stage in life, even though for some that would be an act of cruelty. Many other rights are qualified in different ways, such as the right to family life, which is qualified when people commit crimes of such gravity that their rights must be legally withdrawn.

However, the right not to be tortured is an absolute right. There are no grounds on which torture can ever be acceptable. That is something that our country has recognised for many years. Those Members who have visited the Tower of London—I admit that I have not been for many years—will have seen the signatures produced by that famous traitor Guy Fawkes before and after he was tortured; the first shows the florid script of Tudor handwriting, while the second is a scratchy, ink-stained scrawl across the parchment, demonstrating the harm caused by the rack.

Sadly, elsewhere in the world torture is still used to this day, and indeed in some places it is extremely common. We have heard time and again of the terrible crimes committed against the Yazidis by Islamic State—crimes of torture that really do cry out for justice. Women have been raped, parents have been separated from their children, men have been murdered in the most horrific fashion, and children have been enslaved, to become either sex workers or murderers for Islamic State. We see all too clearly that torture is alive and well.

Sadly, torture is also alive in certain states. Most recently this was brought to our attention in relation to Brunei. It is a moment of great sadness to many of us

who know that Brunei Darussalam, as it calls itself—Brunei, the abode of peace—has been a great friend to the United Kingdom for many years. Today it finds itself reintroducing the penalty, under hudud and sharia, of stoning to death for homosexuals. If that is not a form of torture, and of unbelievably cruel and unusual punishment, I do not know what is.

Torture is alive and well today, despite the 1948 universal declaration of human rights, the 1966 international covenant on civil and political rights, and the 1984 convention against torture, which has now been signed and ratified by over 150 nations and therefore stands part of ordinary law and of the common understanding of rights that people enjoy.

It is worth considering why we are now domesticating these rights and not just allowing existing rules to stand. Of course, they will not stand as we step away from the European Union. It is also worth thinking about why these rights were introduced in Europe in the first place. Of course, many of these rights were introduced not by the European Union but by the European convention on human rights, the amazing piece of drafting that was crafted by lawyers in the aftermath of the second world war—that paragon of torture; that terrible moment when the world looked the devil in the face and the devil really did take hold. In the aftermath of that appalling moment, those laws were drafted by Conservative lawyers—in fact, one of them became a Conservative Attorney General, I am pleased to say—and by people who realised that when the world turns its face to evil, the only thing that occasionally can restrain it is the law.

I am therefore delighted that today we are again recognising that the law requires the ability to control the export of items of torture in order to ensure that we can continue to play our part.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman will be able to confirm that there has been no suggestion whatever that our departure from the EU will in any way impinge on our support for the European convention on human rights, which stands alone and is unaffected by our membership of the EU.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The ECHR was signed in the 1950s, coming well before and standing separate from the EU. Indeed, it underpins many aspects of the laws that have been signed with our neighbouring states, as he will know only too well. Of course, the ECHR was not at all about the import of European law into the United Kingdom; it was about the export into Europe of UK laws written in the aftermath of the horrors of the second world war. It is of great importance that we remember that the EU and the ECHR are different things.

In closing, it is important to recognise that not only is the export of items of torture horrific but it goes against all the values for which this House and these great islands stand. It is therefore a great pleasure to support the Minister.

7.40 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and I look forward to seeing what the hon. Member for Ochil and

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

South Perthshire (Luke Graham) has to say. I welcome and agree with much of what the Minister said, but I will echo one or two of the shadow Minister's concerns, including those about article 24 and delegated powers. I will also raise one or two further concerns later on.

Like other Brexit-related legislation, these draft regulations are pretty technical and perhaps not the easiest or most exhilarating of reads but, as other Members have said, they have an important aim and can contribute to making life more difficult for regimes that continue to practise systematic torture and implement the death penalty, doing so using products that are traded and shipped internationally. Domestic export bans have helped tackle the issue, and the so-called torture goods regulations are the EU's equivalent. It is therefore vital that we retain and even build on the provisions that ban the import and export of goods that can be used only for torture and that we establish a system of licensing for goods with legitimate uses that can also be used for torture. Not only are the provisions consistent with the European convention on human rights, as the Government are obliged to state, but they may help to enhance the protection of those rights in a small but significant way around the world.

However, one issue that I want to raise relates to something set out in the explanatory notes. One of the changes made by the draft regulations is that the "Member State notification requirements are omitted."

Those requirements are found in article 23 of the torture good regulations, and they require member states who turn down or annul authorisations to trade in goods that can be used for torture to notify other member states and the EU Commission of that fact. That means that other authorities can be alert to applications from the same traders and be alive to the issues that led to their general refusal or annulment in the first place.

Why has that requirement been completely removed from the draft regulations? I accept that it is a reciprocal arrangement that the Government have the power to correct under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, but I see no good reason why it should be corrected by taking the requirement out altogether. It is not a typical Brexit-related reciprocal arrangement whereby we would otherwise be left under an obligation for no good reason at all or to the benefit of the EU. In this case, there is a good reason to continue to notify EU member states and the Commission, and the beneficiaries of such notifications would of course be those who would otherwise be on the receiving end of torture if such applications were successful. I regret and query why the requirement to notify has not in some way been preserved. It would be useful to hear more about whether the Government will be seeking to work to come to a similar arrangement with the EU and other member states in future.

More generally, will the Government ensure that this country continues to play its part in tackling the trade in torture goods, including through its membership of the Alliance for Torture-Free Trade? This initiative, started by Argentina, the European Union and Mongolia, brings countries together with the aim of ending the trade in such goods. It promotes controls and restrictions on the goods, best practice, the exchange of information, co-ordination to support monitoring and enforcement,

and technical support for countries wanting to take such measures themselves. The UK is a member state in its own right, not simply through the European Union, which is obviously welcome, but I hope that this country will continue to be an active member of the organisation.

In short, the draft regulations are important, and they have the SNP's full support. However, we must do all that we can to inhibit regimes around the world from perpetrating torture and enforcing the death penalty.

7.44 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I stand to speak in support of the draft regulations. They may sound elementary, but it is important that the UK is explicit in its opposition to instruments of torture. The UK's commitment to that is exemplified by our being one of the signatories of the Alliance for Torture-Free Trade, which the UK has helped to champion around the world, and that sends out a signal internationally.

The United Kingdom has been a leader on human rights for a long time. My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) has already referred to how strong the United Kingdom has been in the past, and this is not just about the recent past. Back in the 19th century, this Parliament was one of the first among the advanced nations to abolish slavery. Yes, the United Kingdom was involved in the slave trade, but it is often overlooked that this was one of the first Parliaments to abolish it. Not only did we reinforce that decision in British waters but we enforced it in international waters around the globe. All merchants in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and throughout what was then the empire were led by this House and told what the right actions were to take and what the moral course was. They were told why trade should be not just about profits but about overall prosperity and moral righteousness.

Statutory instruments such as this are becoming increasingly important. We must ensure that our legal system is explicit, both domestically and internationally, about the element of transparency. Before I came to this place, I worked in finance—I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—and I was able to work abroad. I worked in several Asian countries that are far less democratic than our own, and I regularly heard of cases in which people were subjected to overt, covert, explicit and emotional torture. No one was ever held to account. There was no transparency in the judiciary to hold people accountable, there was certainly no authority to hold the Government to account or, indeed, individual traders or merchants involved in supplying the materials that facilitated torture. When people who were taking part in political demonstrations, the likes of which we see outside this place every day, are taken away, bundled into a van and then never heard of again, one starts to understand the importance of this type of legislation and why the United Kingdom's position as a leader in human rights and against torture is so important.

Maintaining standards is also important. We in this House are acutely aware of that just now, and it is certainly something that we should probably reflect on more and more. However, this is also about our country maintaining standards across the world. Over the past two decades—certainly when I was going through my education—I have seen the United Kingdom soften its

lines and sometimes let standards slip. Whether in the misadministration in Iraq or not adhering to red lines in Syria, mistakes have cost so many lives, both at home and abroad. The ghosts will haunt us for many years to come. We cannot dare to repeat those kinds of mistakes in this place or elsewhere.

We must continue to champion human rights and to reinforce the international order. We must also continue to set new standards, so that when new challenges to the international order emerge—in whatever form they may be—this House can rise to meet them and ensure that we lead people together in prosperity, in peace and in moral authority.

7.48 pm

Graham Stuart: It has been a great pleasure to participate in this debate. We have heard powerful speeches, not least from the Opposition spokeswoman but also from the SNP spokesman and from my hon. Friends the Members for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham).

Most of the questions came from the Opposition spokeswoman, as is appropriate. As for what happened with the process, the original draft regulations had to be withdrawn when the EU regulation was codified into a new version. Splitting the UK legislation was the most expedient way of dealing with the problem, and I really do appreciate the hon. Lady's support for what we are trying to do tonight. We have no plans for further amendments, and I can confirm that the Government will maintain strong controls over the trade in goods usable for capital punishment or torture.

The hon. Lady asked about precedent from other states. When we leave the EU we will no longer receive information from other member states about licences that they have refused. We will, however, continue to take account of all relevant information that comes our way when assessing licence applications and—this goes to the heart of the question asked by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart

C. McDonald) of the SNP—we would welcome the opportunity to continue co-operation with the EU, but that will be subject to whatever settlement we finally agree.

The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) asked about reporting and transparency. We will report annually. Right now, we publish more information than almost any other nation and we want that transparent approach to continue. Of course, the UK operates one of the most rigorous and transparent export licensing systems in the world, and all export licence applications are considered on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria. We are not changing those. We publish quarterly and annual statistics on our export licensing decisions, including details of export licences granted and refused.

I have been asked about penalties. Breaches of regulation can lead to up to 10 years in prison. We plan to maintain the existing regime. We will also continue—this issue has also been raised—to be an active member of the global Alliance for Torture-free Trade after leaving the EU.

We have a responsibility to ensure the safety and security of our people. The regulations support that objective and I am grateful to colleagues from across the House for supporting them. I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Trade in Torture etc. Goods (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 March, be approved.

ELECTRICITY

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft Electricity Capacity (No. 1) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 28 February, be approved.—*(Amanda Milling.)*

Question agreed to.

Backbench Business

UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

7.51 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

First, I thank every member of the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate, as well as all those Members who indicated their support for it.

Every year on 21 March, the United Nations marks the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination through a series of worldwide events. That is because 21 March was the date of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre in South Africa, when police opened fire and killed 69 people at a peaceful demonstration against the apartheid pass laws. The day was proclaimed six years later, through a United Nations resolution on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination, adopted on 26 October 1966. Although the international day for the elimination of racial discrimination itself was a few weeks ago, I am delighted that the House is now able formally to mark it with a debate in this Chamber.

As a Muslim MP and a proud advocate of tolerance, peace and integration, the issue is close to my heart. As the first ever Muslim Mayor of Warrington and MP for Warrington South, I have always understood the value of embracing difference and bringing communities together. Almost 96% of Warrington's inhabitants are white, but I have never been made to feel like an outsider. The people of Warrington have made me a welcome part of their community ever since I went to live there with my family more than 20 years ago. I have been proud to call Warrington my home ever since.

Sadly, we know that not all ethnic minorities are as fortunate as I have been to live in such a hospitable, tolerant environment. If all communities were as welcoming as Warrington, there would be no need for us to have this debate. As it is, many forms of racism and discrimination are on the rise. Disturbing, violent trends of antisemitism and Islamophobia have become more and more frequent. I have already mentioned the horrendous attack on the Muslim community in New Zealand last month. A Jewish place of worship in Pittsburgh was subject to a similar attack five months earlier—the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in US history. Both killers were clear in their hatred of both Jews and Muslims. Both subscribed to the far-right “great replacement” theory, which casts Muslims and other minorities as invaders of western societies and a threat to white, Christian majorities. It seems appropriate that the specific theme to mark this year's UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is mitigating and countering rising national populism and extreme supremacist ideologies. In the wake of those horrific far-right attacks, I am sure that Members will agree that the theme could not be timelier.

Those are not just sporadic attacks in far-flung corners of the world; they represent part of a wider trend and their impact has been felt much closer to home. Just two

weeks ago, the trial of a neo-Nazi who had plotted to kill a Member of this House was concluded. The plotter had been a member of the fascist National Action group. During the trial, the prosecution told the court that National Action had engaged in a campaign of

“racist, anti-Semitic and homophobic propaganda through which it sought to stir up a violent ‘race war’ against ethnic minorities and others it perceived as ‘race traitors’.”

I echo Mr Speaker's sentiments last week in commending the courage and integrity of my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) when faced with that vile hatred. She has demonstrated that Members of this House will not be cowed by a violent and hateful creed.

In the face of such vile hatred, it is all too easy to give in to despair, but I recall the words of Jo Cox, who from these Benches insisted that

“we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

Her words, and indeed her life, serve as an inspiration for us all. We saw Jo's ethos in action even in the immediate aftermath of both the Christchurch and the Pittsburgh shootings. Muslim groups raised more than \$200,000 for bereaved families at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, and the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh is now raising money for the victims of the New Zealand mosque attacks. I cannot think of a more fitting illustration of Jo's message, with diverse communities coming together to reject racism, bigotry and hatred.

In my own constituency, local people of all faiths and backgrounds also came together in a local mosque to commemorate the victims of the Christchurch shootings. I am sure that many Members are able to recount similar initiatives in their constituencies, with countless examples of communities coming together to reject evil and hatred. It is a reminder, even in the darkest of moments, that if we come together to promote peace, tolerance and mutual understanding, bigotry will never prevail.

If we are to counter this threat, we must seek to understand its origins and the conditions that allow it to flourish, for there can be no doubt that white nationalist, far-right violence is firmly on the rise. In the US in 2018, every single one of the 50 extremist-related murders were linked to the far right, according to the Anti-Defamation League. In the UK between 2017 and 2018, the number of white suspects arrested for terror offences outstripped those of any other ethnic group for the first time in more than a decade. In Germany, official figures suggest that nine in 10 antisemitic crimes in 2017 were carried out by members of far-right or neo-Nazi groups.

How are we to make sense of this phenomenon? The UN produced two reports in August 2018 that investigated on a global scale contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. The reports argued that the “new forms of media” are partly responsible for the rise in nationalist populism and described how they

“aided or amplified the influence of nationalist populism”.

One study has suggested that American white nationalist movements saw their Twitter following grow by more than 600% between 2012 and 2016. These non-traditional media platforms have been used to revive fascist ideas thought to have been consigned to history.

We need to look again at the responsibility of large technology companies and how these platforms are regulated. Given the size of platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, they have an obligation to ensure that hatred, bigotry and misinformation—I emphasise that misinformation is the key—are not allowed to flourish on their watch. In recent years, we have seen the rise of far-right social media personalities who now have the ability to reach unprecedented numbers of people online. Not only are these individuals allowed to peddle their hatred to huge audiences, but they are able to profit from doing so.

Traditional forms of media have also been complicit in fuelling these racist narratives. During the height of the refugee crisis in 2015, at the very moment when African men, women and children were drowning in the Mediterranean, *The Sun* published a column describing these people as “cockroaches.” That is shocking and disgusting coming from a national newspaper. The columnist went on to argue:

“What we need are gunships sending these boats back to their own country.”

These were desperate people risking their lives, and often their children’s lives, to flee a desperate, desperate conflict. Nobody wants to leave their country unless they are desperate, and those people were desperate because of the conflict, because of the wars and because of the lack of input from the world. What kind of cruel, inhuman response is it to suggest meeting them with gunships?

Those comments were denounced by the UN’s human rights chief as akin to antisemitic Nazi propaganda. Indeed, this dehumanising rhetoric poisons public debate. For too long, ethnic minorities have been scapegoated in our national press. The media have an indispensable role in our democracy, but it must come with great public responsibility.

Racism in the workplace also continues to be a major problem in the UK. A recent survey by Prospect, the trade union, found that nearly half of ethnic minority workers have witnessed racism in their workplace, with a quarter of black and ethnic minority employees reporting that they have been racially abused.

Just this weekend there were four separate reported instances of alleged racial abuse before, during and after premier league and football league matches, which appears to emphasise a problem highlighted during the week by England international Danny Rose. Tragically, in 2019, Rose was forced to admit that he “can’t wait to see the back of football” because he is so disgusted by the racism that blights the game. I commend the example of high-profile individuals like Danny Rose and Raheem Sterling for speaking out and taking a stand against this vile abuse, but it is not good enough for us simply to wring our hands whenever this issue is raised and depend on the courage of a vocal few.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I apologise for arriving late.

My hon. Friend has touched on such an important point. We have seen some of our sportsmen, particularly our young black British sportsmen, having to undergo racial abuse while they are proudly playing for their country—England. Does he agree that they have shown great courage and dignity in speaking out against the

racism they endure? Frankly, we thought that racism was back in our history, but it is still present and remains within the game of football today.

Faisal Rashid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no need for any sort of racism in any society, especially in sport—it is unbelievable.

We need to systematically eradicate all forms of racist abuse from public life. There should be an absolute zero-tolerance policy towards racism, yet governing bodies like UEFA dole out minor fines and partial stadium closures when teams are subjected to racist abuse. It is nowhere near good enough.

Finally, young people have a pivotal role to play in defeating new forms of racism. Ever since I became involved in politics, I have been inspired by the example of young people seeking to make the world a better place to live. We have recently seen the climate change protests by young people all over the world, teaching us the importance of tackling climate change for future generations. But young people are also on the frontline and at the receiving end of much of this new and pernicious rise in racism, particularly online.

Many young people are adopting extreme and racist views as a result of the content they see online, day in and day out. We can do more to combat this in our schools. Young people must be better equipped to identify new forms of misinformation and bigotry if we are to prevent these poisonous ideas from taking hold of future generations. The fight against bigotry and racism begins in the classroom. This is one of the many reasons why our current underfunding of schools is a national scandal. How can we expect future generations to build on our hard-won victories against racism and intolerance if we starve their schools of funding and resources?

I say to far-right racists: ethnic minorities are not going anywhere. We deserve to live, work and raise our families in peace in our own country. The fight against racism and all forms of discrimination is a mainstay of peace and social cohesion, especially in our increasingly diverse society. With this in mind, I hope the Government commit to marking this day each year, so that we are able to celebrate our diversity and remember those who have committed their lives to fighting racism for a better future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have six speakers, so may I suggest they each take around five minutes to ensure we get on to the Lords amendments in time and are not interrupted?

8.8 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) on securing this debate and on his speech, especially the last few sentiments he expressed, which were greeted around the House with calls of “Hear, hear!” He has spoken for all of us in his denunciation of all forms of bigoted racism, and he has spoken for the whole of our community in resoundingly saying that those who hate will not win.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My hon. Friend is quite right about the speech by the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid); it was particularly nice to hear that Warrington South is so inclusive. Does my

[Richard Graham]

hon. Friend agree that the difficulty with hate abuse, racial abuse and intolerance in general is that it comes not just from the far right, as disgusting and abhorrent as that is, but from the far left and across the spectrum? We should be against it wherever it comes from and wherever it is directed.

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Yesterday's lead story in *The Sunday Times* was a shocking catalogue of antisemitism inside the Labour party, which I am sure all decent Labour Members feel is as abhorrent as my hon. Friends and I do. The reality is that we live in a time when antisemitism and Islamophobic behaviour are increasing.

I am grateful that this debate has coincided with the release of the Government's Online Harms White Paper, the consultation on which is now under way. It is essential that we counter hate wherever it raises its ugly head. We must be united against all forms of intolerance. We must work together across the parties and across our communities to build a world in which everyone has equal protection of their rights and equal access to justice, education and economic opportunity, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, sexuality or race.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend talked about the Government's White Paper. Does he agree that the White Paper is particularly urgent because social media is normalising utterly toxic and reprehensible behaviour? We need to lay down a marker that it is not acceptable in real life, it is not acceptable online and it is certainly not normal. We must reject it.

Stephen Kerr: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. We live in the age of the false ideology of hate. We all experience it as Members of Parliament. It is clearly and utterly unacceptable.

Let me reflect on these words of Martin Luther King:

"I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be...this is the interrelated structure of reality...all mankind is tied together...in a single garment of destiny."

Those are inspiring words and thoughts.

May I conclude my brief remarks with reference to the experience that we have had in the Stirling constituency when it comes to embracing those who are different—and thank goodness for it? Just a couple of weeks ago, I had the pleasure of visiting the Islamic centre in Stirling with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), and we had the opportunity to speak to those who had gathered for Friday prayers. It was inspirational for me and my hon. Friend to be present.

It brought to mind an experience I had some time ago when an imam shared with me this simple idea: as beautiful as a bouquet of flowers of a single type is, how much more beautiful is a bouquet of many varieties of flower? That is the vision of our society that I hold on to. In front of me in the Islamic centre in Stirling were stalwarts of our community. They run successful businesses and play a very active part in all aspects of the life of the various communities that make up the Stirling constituency. I am proud of them. Undoubtedly, to echo the sentiment of the hon. Member for Warrington

South, they are part of us and we are part of them; we belong together; our home is their home and their home is our home.

I will conclude with a brief reference to the enrichment that comes through the arrival in Stirling every year of a fresh group of international students. They come from various countries, traditions and faiths, bringing colour and vibrancy to Stirling. Our lives are enriched by what they bring to our community. That is the nature of our society in modern Britain. We should rejoice in that. I invite the House to rejoice in those differences, because they make us what we are.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): There is very little in what the hon. Gentleman says that I disagree with. Does he agree with me that racism is not just interpersonal, but systemic? It is difficult to sit and listen to the words he is saying when we know of the record of this Government—of the Prevent agenda, of the Windrush generation, of the "Go Home" vans. What he has said is fine, but racism is systemic and is often perpetrated by the state.

Stephen Kerr: I said clearly that we should counter racism and hate wherever it raises its head. I find it rather rich that the hon. Lady would take this opportunity to attack Conservative Members, especially in the light of the state of the Labour party so graphically illustrated in yesterday's report in *The Sunday Times*.

Marsha De Cordova: As a black woman, I find it is very important that we do not belittle or disregard the issues that face us. We saw a hostile environment with the Windrush generation that was criminal. As the granddaughter of the Windrush generation, I think the hon. Gentleman has to admit that that was caused by his Government and no other.

Stephen Kerr: I have incurred your displeasure, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I apologise for taking too long.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I did say that there were five minutes each. We are now running on to eight minutes. I am very concerned about other speakers. I do not want to introduce a time limit, but if Members cannot stick to five minutes, I will make sure they go to the bottom of the list in future. I do not want to have to do that.

Stephen Kerr: I will just conclude by saying that an attempt to diminish any one of us diminishes all of us.

8.16 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let me make it clear, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it is not my aim to incur your displeasure and go to the bottom of the list, so I will try to limit interventions.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) for bringing such an important debate to the Chamber today. It is unfortunate that we do not have long to debate such an important matter, but we are where we are. At the end of March, we observed the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, but that is not the only reason that this is such a timely debate. In this country, where

we pride ourselves on our tolerance, we still see alarming levels of racial discrimination and hatred. Even as we implore other countries to do more to tackle racial discrimination, we ourselves must never be complacent and must always do much more.

Nowhere is this alarming racial discrimination and the disturbing lack of action to tackle it seen more clearly than in the rise of the far right in this country. We are seeing the resurgence of fascist ideologies and extremist groups that we fought off decades ago. They are now returning with the same hatred for other races, ideologies, backgrounds and religions.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Imran Hussain: I will, but I will not take many interventions.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for his generosity. I want to echo his words, because the Brexit debate seems to have given new groups the feeling that they can speak in racist terms. On Saturday, the North East Patriotic Front demonstrated in Newcastle. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that they were outnumbered more than 10 to one by those fighting against racism and Islamophobia. As we have seen repeatedly over the decades, every new example of the rise of the far right needs to be combated by each new generation.

Imran Hussain: I thank my hon. Friend. Let us as a House come together to celebrate the fact that in the face of hatred and division of any kind, we stand in unity and make sure that those who seek to divide us never ever succeed. We reaffirm that principle here today.

Just last month, the Security Service and the Met police identified far-right terrorism as a key threat to the safety of our country, with the police having stopped a number of far-right terror attacks over the past few years. The Hope Not Hate “State of Hate 2019” report echoes that, finding not only a continued rising trend in traffic to far-right websites and in followers of far-right social media accounts, but that the far right is getting younger and more extreme. I will not mince my words: we are witnessing a dangerous resurgence of Nazi ideology. When we talk about racial discrimination today, we cannot avoid that topic.

We also cannot avoid the fact that racial discrimination has been encouraged and the far right emboldened, normalised and even legitimised by the media and others who must share the blame. In very many instances, broadcasters and newspapers have given air time and column inches to those who spread hate, giving them the means to do so in the name of balanced coverage. Nothing is balanced about the far-right, extreme views of those who seek to divide us and share more with neo-Nazism than with a modern, tolerant society, so that practice must end. We must give no platform to those who spread hatred.

Furthermore, we must not just call out and shut down racism, hatred and extreme far-right fascist views where we see them, but press authorities to do much more. Right now, they are doing nowhere near what is necessary to tackle the resurgence of fascism, with a dangerous over-reliance on tip-offs or mistakes by extremists. That was demonstrated most recently in the case of National Action, which was brought down and brought

to justice through the work not of agencies but of Hope Not Hate. I pay tribute to that organisation, which has a long-standing track record of fighting against racism. It continues to do that work. However, we should never be in the situation of third sector organisations doing more to combat extremism than those we should trust to keep us safe.

I have a lengthy speech but, looking at the clock, I see that time does not permit it. However, I join my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South in paying tribute to Raheem Sterling. As a House, we should come together on that, because he has made his views absolutely clear. On the way here, while I was writing my speech—a lot of which I have not been able to deliver in the debate, tragically—I saw that statement on the television. He made it clear that racism will not defeat any sportsmen, on or off the pitch. I pay tribute to him.

8.22 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I too pay tribute to the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), who made a powerful speech. I congratulate him on securing this vital debate to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. I know it was on 1 March—we have had to wait—but the debate is none the less worth while.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned his own welcoming town. I want to reflect briefly on my town and the way in which it is now a diverse community—very different from what it was. Many people look at Solihull from a west midlands perspective and think of it as quite well-to-do—there is a joke that a crash in Solihull is what someone has between two Land Rovers—and traditional, meaning white in that respect.

In reality, however, Solihull like so much of the west midlands is changing enormously. What tends to happen is that people do well in Birmingham and other places, then come to and are welcome in our town and add vibrancy to it, as it expands exponentially due to the influx of people. We now have a higher than national average of BAME—black, Asian and minority ethnic—communities, and strong and vibrant Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities, as well as Greek, Jewish, Jain and Zoroastrian ones. There are so many, I could almost take the remaining three and a half minutes of my speech mentioning them.

Solihull is a fantastic embodiment of diversity in the west midlands, and of success in that diversity, but we face our challenges. Of late, those challenges have been writ large in our town. Quite recently, we had the horror of pigs heads being left outside the Hub, a Muslim community and education centre on Hermitage Road in Solihull, by far-right activists, all because people of the same faith had decided to come together in order to bring about education and something positive in the community—absolutely shocking, as some of my hon. Friends have said.

We also have worries and concerns about antisemitism. Some in my Jewish community have spoken to me, often confidentially, about their fears right now about the rising tide of antisemitism. I will not indulge in anything party political on that—I trust, I know and I am sure that every Member of this House is absolutely horrified by the twin pillars of evil, Islamophobia and antisemitism. We stand with our communities on that.

[Julian Knight]

What do I think is at the root of those changes in Solihull? Social media has been mentioned, and we had the White Paper today. That will be only a part of a broad, patchwork approach that we will have to take as a Government and across western civilisation to managing something that is as great as the creation of the printing press. I am reminded of the fact that after the invention of the printing press in the 15th century Europe indulged in two centuries of civil wars, partly as a result of that greater communication and the way ideas could be communicated, often disturbing to the status quo.

That is the challenge that we face with some of the keyboard warriors in our society who let dark thoughts come out of the darkest recesses of their minds. Also, as groups become more empowered, the counter-stroke becomes sharper, and people react more violently in their language and behaviour.

What do we do to counter that? First, we need education, not just in our schools and colleges but in our communities—in places such as the Hub in Solihull and the Shree community centre in Sparkbrook near my constituency. We also need to say to each other, to say as a society, “I will not let racism pass. I will not stand there when these comments are made. I will tackle it, and I will do what is right.” Frankly, that is what will make our society work, and work in the long term.

8.27 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) for securing this debate. I agree with everything he said in introducing it. It is completely right to talk about attacks in the US and elsewhere. He and the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) were also completely right to talk about the growth of racism on the far right and the dangers of the growth in populist nationalism.

As we have just heard about Solihull, there have been shocking attacks on mosques in the city of Birmingham. We all have to be vigilant about that. I am in touch with the mosques in Dudley to express my solidarity with Dudley’s Muslim community and to ensure that they have all the security assistance that they need.

I am delighted that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) is here, because about a year ago she, I and the hon. Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) stood in the biggest room in the hotel in which, 50 years earlier, Enoch Powell made his shameful “rivers of blood” speech, and we celebrated the unity and diversity of communities in the west midlands. Since then, I have stood with members of the Muslim community in Dudley when they have been targeted by the British National party or the English Defence League. I have stood up for constituents in Dudley who, like people elsewhere in the country, were victimised because they were part of the Windrush generation.

This is also the anniversary, almost to the day, of when Britain’s Jewish community came together in the square across the street to protest against racism in the Labour party. I am afraid that we have to address that. We lose our legitimacy in complaining about other people’s racism if we are not prepared to deal with the

problems in our own parties. I want to tell the House about Susan Pollock. She was born in 1930 in Hungary and was imprisoned as a teenager in Auschwitz. She now spends her time travelling the country telling young people about the evils of racism and prejudice. I first met her when she came to Dudley to talk at our annual holocaust commemoration. The second time I met her—an Auschwitz survivor in her late 80s—was in the demonstration across the road. It was the first political demonstration she had been on in her life. I have left the Labour party, but I spent 35 years in it, and I found that deeply shocking and shameful.

It is terrible that a culture of extremism and antisemitism has resulted in the Labour party’s being investigated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. I think that is really shocking. In *The Sunday Times* this weekend, we heard about a failure to take proper disciplinary action against hundreds of members accused of antisemitism—people who said things like

“‘Heil Hitler’, ‘F*** the Jews’ and ‘Jews are the problem’”.

They have not been expelled—it is absolutely shocking—even though complaints had been received a year ago. A councillor in Lancashire has been let back into the party after fuming about Jewish media attacks and the Rothschild family.

If I complained about everybody who said that sort of stuff to me, I would have no time to do anything else, but I complained about one member last year, because he also threatened violence at my office, which is in a building that also contains a women’s aid centre. This guy questioned the numbers killed in the holocaust and said that 6 million was the magic number. He told the Jewish community to “Put up or shut up.” He talked about “Zionist scum”, and used really obscene remarks that I will not repeat. I complained about him last August. Despite repeated emails and requests, eventually—unbelievably—he was finally suspended in February. He is still a member, as far as I am aware. I really hope that the party is listening and will deal with that.

I think that the chair of the Jewish Leadership Council, Jonathan Goldstein, was completely right this weekend to condemn what he called “corruption” within Labour. He said that those who covered it up should be “relieved of their duties”. He said:

“Last July, I called the Labour Party institutionally racist against Jews. Today’s revelations in the Sunday Times make clear for all to see just how accurate that statement was.”

Even the Deputy Speaker—sorry, I mean the deputy leader, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson). Actually, I am sure you are just as appalled as I am by all this, Mr Deputy Speaker. The deputy leader of the Labour party said yesterday:

“This makes for deeply shocking and depressing reading. Labour members and the Jewish community will not understand how, many years on from the first concerns about anti-semitism being raised, we have not got to grips with it.”

It is profoundly shocking to me that a political party that I joined as a teenager to fight racism has become embroiled in a scandal like this. It has been dealt with much more seriously. The Labour party must respond properly to the reasonable requests made by the Jewish community more than a year ago, and must boot out the racists for good. As Jonathan Goldstein said this weekend, “Enough is enough.”

8.33 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), who gave a speech of extraordinary fluency and power. Everybody in this House knows that racism is morally and intellectually bankrupt. That is the easy bit to say. The difficult bit to face up to is that there are clear examples that show that it is on the rise. We might have lulled ourselves into a false feeling of security that there is an iron rule of social progress that determines that it should wither, but it has not. We are seeing much more of it; it has not been consigned to the dustbin of history.

Hon. Members have talked about what the possible reasons are for that, and we have talked a bit about social media, but it is worth highlighting why social media is relevant. It seems to me that the reason is this. Individuals can exist in communities that are otherwise beacons of tolerance, and yet the online community is more important to them than the real-world community that they live within. When people talk about loners, in the past that might have been individuals alone with their books, but now those loners are behind a screen, finding individuals elsewhere in the world who have similar outlooks and warped perspectives. The critical point is that this allows such individuals to normalise atrocious and appalling behaviour, to say unspeakable things about which they then find succour and comfort elsewhere in the world, and to drive each other on to ever more unspeakable thoughts and, in some appalling cases, actions.

What are the solutions? Time does not allow any great opportunity to expand on these, but I invite the House to consider three things. First, we have to do everything possible to ensure that individuals can build real-world experiences of interacting with people of backgrounds and faiths. One of the things that has struck me so powerfully in Cheltenham is to see people of all backgrounds coming together through the National Citizen Service, for example, meeting people with whom they might otherwise never expect to have any contact and finding, in the inspiring words of Jo Cox, that we have of course more in common. Increasingly, however, it requires the hand of the state to intervene to ensure that such opportunities are available. We saw that during the community day held in Winston Churchill gardens in Cheltenham, with people of all faiths interacting and being enriched through that experience.

Secondly, in Cheltenham—forgive me for mentioning it again—the security services are intensely important. At GCHQ, we have some of the finest minds anywhere in our country, and one of their key tasks is to root out violent extremism of the far right or of the far left and bring it to justice.

Thirdly, the social media companies need to get their house in order. I strongly welcome the White Paper that has been issued today, which will lay down a marker. If material that is likely to inspire hate and intolerance comes to be on their platforms, they have a duty to take it down within a reasonable period, and if they do not, the state will take action and it will hit them where it hurts—in their pockets.

Chi Onwurah: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about both GCHQ and the tech giants. Does he agree that to be more able and to be seen to eliminate racial discrimination from platforms and

technology, the tech giants and others, including GCHQ, should better represent the diversity of the country in which they are rooted?

Alex Chalk: Yes, of course that is absolutely right. When I referred to the tech giants, I was thinking about Facebook and Instagram. Our security and intelligence agencies, such as GCHQ, should of course be diverse, and I know that it takes that extremely seriously. However, the most important point, if I may say so, that I note when I meet people from GCHQ is their absolute common determination—whether they are black, white, gay, straight or whatever—to tackle and root out this hate-filled behaviour and bring it to justice; they are utterly determined in that quest. I have found it extremely moving and uplifting to hear their determination to achieve precisely that.

With those remarks, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will conclude, but thank you for the opportunity to speak.

8.37 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I say that many of us will sympathise with the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin)? I think he has spoken for the people on his Labour side of the House, and I hope that people on my Conservative side of the House would do the same if we had things like that in our party.

I want to approach this in two ways. The first is to give publicity to someone whom I do not think deserves it, but who is dangerous—Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, also known as Andrew McMaster, as Paul Harris, as Wayne King and now as Tommy Robinson. He is apparently a special adviser to the present leader, Gerard Batten, of UKIP. This man Stephen Yaxley-Lennon has been convicted over the years of assault, threatening behaviour, common assault, false identity documents, mortgage fraud—the judge said that it came to £640,000—and contempt of court. I am leaving aside any other current charges that may be around. I say to all my constituents, “If you are fed up with the Tory party, don’t go to a party like UKIP that takes him in as a leader’s adviser. If UKIP changes and throws him out, by all means, but until then, don’t. He’s dangerous, and the people he associates with are dangerous as well.”

The second thing is a total change of thought, but it follows up a point made from the Opposition side of the House. For people to get good jobs, they need good education. I have been helping a maths teacher who is Ghanaian. He is a really good maths teacher, and when he left a particular school, its results fell. He has been pursued by a number of people in a vendetta that has caused him to be arrested twice in the last few months, to lose his job and to be hanging around for possibly up to another nine months while the Teaching Regulation Agency and the Disclosure and Barring Service consider whether he is fit to teach. He clearly is fit to teach. He should not have been treated like that, and I do not believe that, had he been white, he would have been, either by the police or by the education authorities. I regret that the Department for Education was involved in causing him to have his last job withdrawn.

I spend a lot of time working with people who have problems. The ones that are most difficult to put right are those that involve Sikhs or other people from the subcontinent. We all know about Dr Hadiza Bawa-Garba,

[Sir Peter Bottomley]

the paediatrician who was, in my view, treated very unfairly by investigators, by prosecutors and by the General Medical Council.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman and I share many views about human rights and religious persecution. Does he agree that this great, diverse nation—the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—has a broad culture and historical background that brings in people from around the world, but that what brings us together is the love, respect and tolerance we have for one another? If that is at the core of our nation, we have a way of going forward.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I do.

My last example is the case of Gurpal Viridi, the excellent former police sergeant who managed to find himself on trial for a week and a half at Southwark Crown court on totally bogus charges. I wrote in advance to the Crown Prosecution Service, the Metropolitan police and the Home Office, but none of them seem to want to have an inquiry into how it all went wrong. I will return to that after Easter. I have other examples, but with those words I will resume my seat.

8.41 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) on securing the debate. I am genuinely grateful to be able to align myself with the comments by him and by the many other speakers from across the Chamber, who approached the debate with the correct tone. As well as the hon. Gentleman, we heard from the hon. Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), for Solihull (Julian Knight), for Dudley North (Ian Austin), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley)—and, miraculously, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) snuck in there. He never misses an opportunity.

The theme for this year's International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is

“mitigating and countering rising nationalist populism and extreme supremacist ideologies.”

That is one of the biggest flashpoints of racial discrimination. We have to look at the situation we find ourselves in. We fail to recognise the serious ramifications for the general public of our surrounding ourselves with Brexit. The language and general policy making exhibited by this place send a message loudly and clearly to people across the country and give them the genuine feeling that they are not welcome.

Those are not just my words; they are the words of my constituents who attended a surgery for EU nationals. They told me they no longer feel welcome, valued or recognised for their contributions to the UK. That message comes loudly and clearly from this place, and we must all do more to recognise and address that. Frankly, no one outside this Chamber can bear to hear the word “Brexit” any more or cares whether a Lords amendment is coming back, but they do care fundamentally about the messages we send and about the long-term impact of racism.

The fact of the matter is this. We often value the virtue of freedom of speech. As the hon. Member for Worthing West rightly highlighted, there are too many

opportunities for the far right to gain a platform and, worryingly, it has gained an even greater platform through the Brexit process. We in this House have created that problem by having a debate in the Chamber but not debating or listening to anyone outside it. No wonder the public have lost confidence.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that the rhetoric used by the media and, sadly, sometimes by politicians—including the man who occupies the White House—is built on racial superiority? As the footballer John Barnes said recently, the basis of racial discrimination is the hundreds of years of—I hope people will forgive me for saying this—European white superiority.

Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady, and she is right to highlight that. Whether through football or our conversations in this place, in the media or on social media platforms, the message that we send to the world—and that world leaders send—implying that those things are acceptable has a clear resonance in society and cannot go unaddressed.

Before, during and after the Brexit referendum, there was a distinct growth in the volume and acceptability of xenophobic discourse on migration, foreign nationals and refugees in everyday life. None of that is aided by the fact that the media are quite happy to promote that discourse. As I have said, last month I held an EU nationals surgery. Among the themes was the fear for the future, security of foreign pensions and distrust of the settlement scheme. Those I spoke to genuinely felt like this Government did not want to make them feel welcome, but was instead putting them through a laborious bureaucratic process. I can only share that frustration. What kind of message does it send to someone who has spent their entire life in Scotland, raising their family, working and paying their taxes, to discover that they have fill out a form to qualify to remain in the UK after an unknown deadline—a moving goalpost? Many of those who have felt hounded by the UK Government were desperate for more information about what their rights would be. I am sorry to say that I could provide them with no more clarity about that than most of us in this House can provide about today's business. If we do not even know what we are doing from one day to the next, what chance do people in general life have to understand?

To return to the point of today's debate, in Scotland we do not want to see any EU nationals living in our country leave. As a party, the SNP has recognised the valuable contribution of EU nationals to Scotland and to our public services. Ultimately, those public services could collapse and we could lose the rich cultural contributions made by our friends and neighbours, who have come to be a part of our lives and our world, and part of the UK. They should feel welcome here in the UK. The message from the First Minister could not be clearer: we want you to stay in the UK, we value you and we welcome you. I wish to put on record my gratitude, my heartfelt thanks and my appreciation for the contribution made by those of my constituents in Lanark and Hamilton East, and those across the UK. I sincerely hope that they will stay and make Scotland their home.

I understand that I have to hurry up, so I leave hon. Members with this parting thought. Scotland has benefited from the rich diaspora across the UK. We have a rich

tapestry, and I would hate to see it lost because of the language and messaging of this country. The Home Office has a responsibility to send a loud and clear message to EU nationals that they deserve to feel and should feel part of the UK, and they should remain and we want them to remain. The Government have to send that message instead of perpetrating the racist language that is ultimately being given through subliminal messaging in the programme of this Government.

8.47 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I know that there is not a lot of time left to sum up—you may need to stop me if I get close to time, Mr Deputy Speaker—but I want to thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) on today's excellent debate. If we look at the diversity around the House, we can see that there are lots of people who want to contribute. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate to take place. It is a shame that we do not have enough time to really do it justice, which is why we must ensure that next time the debate takes place in Government time.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, the theme for today is mitigating and countering rising nationalist populism and extreme supremacist ideologies. We all have to work harder, through our actions and our words, if we are to combat that. Do we say things that are inclusive or dismissive when we speak? Is the environment that we create embracing or hostile? Why is that important? It is important because if we create a hostile environment, we fuel hate and right-wing ideologies. We have to underscore the dangers of populism on both the left and the right. National populism must keep sight of the ways in which multiple intersecting identities transform the experience of racial discrimination.

We have heard some great speeches today from across the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) talked about the growth of young right wingers and how dangerous they are.

I want to take a moment to talk about Dylann Roof, 25, who shot nine black people dead in a church; Alex Fields, 20, who killed Heather Heyer. Robert Bowers was an exception as he was 46 when he killed 11 Jewish worshippers in a synagogue; Brenton Tarrant, 28, was responsible for the Christchurch, New Zealand shootings, murdering 50 people and attempting to murder 39; Thomas Mair shot and killed our friend Jo Cox; and Jack Renshaw, just 23, a convicted paedophile, tried to kill my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). Hope not Hate saved her life. Jack Coulson, 19, is in prison for the threats made against the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). These are all young white right-wing extremists. Both here and in the US we have sadly witnessed a surge of intolerance, a growth of the far right and increasing hate crime towards minority communities. We must not become complacent in the fight for equality or allow any of our hard-fought rights to be rolled back.

Almost every piece of progressive legislation in the UK was delivered by a Labour Government, including the Race Relations Act 1968 and the Human Rights Act 1998. Meanwhile, current legislation means that people can only bring a discrimination claim on the grounds of one aspect of their identity. We must do better. Section 14 of the Equality Act 2010 must be enacted so we can bring forward cases on multiple grounds of discrimination.

There are challenges, but it is important to celebrate our diversities and most people have used this opportunity to celebrate in their own constituencies. We must strive not for tolerance in society, but for acceptance. Too much have we talked about tolerance.

I know time is very short, but the words and language of Members in this House is so important. The N word is never acceptable. I am still waiting for an explanation as to why the N word was used at a particular meeting. As I say, we must be very careful. We must be exemplary in our attitudes in this place. Nationalists and populist Governments often deploy a range of tactics to disenfranchise groups portrayed as outsiders, including racial and ethnic minorities. We, including the Government, have to do better.

There are so many things I would like to mention, but I know I have to take my seat. I thank all Members for mentioning my constituent Raheem Sterling and the work that he has been doing to call out racism in football and society. He is saying that when we talk about racism and hate crimes we must talk about these issues fairly. There is no point in the names I read out being referred to as people with mental health illnesses and other people as terrorists. They are all terrorists. They are all evil nasty people.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) quoted Martin Luther King—one of my favourite quotes—on the interrelated structure of reality, but I will end on something else that Martin Luther King said:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

He also said, and I hope we can take a bit of this away with us today:

“Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”

8.53 pm

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): It is a privilege to respond to a very fine debate to mark the UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. I fear, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I have far too little time to respond to the range of points that were made in this important debate. I acknowledge the case that was made to mark the day on a regular basis, every year.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) and the Backbench Business Committee on securing time on the Floor of the House to debate this important subject. The hon. Gentleman made an exceptionally powerful speech. I was delighted to hear him explain, as a former Mayor of Warrington, the hospitable and tolerant nature of his home city, and the call he made for peace and tolerance.

There were excellent speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), for Solihull (Julian Knight), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and from the hon. Members for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), for Dudley North (Ian Austin), for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). Common themes arose. There was an iteration of the observation of the rise of extreme far-right and fascist views, which we all agree have no place in our society. There was an observation about the prevalence of such views on social media, and comments welcoming the Online Harms White Paper that the Government published

[Harriett Baldwin]

today. I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to write in with support for the approach being taken in the White Paper.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling said one of his local imams wants a society that represents a bouquet of different flowers; those words were particularly powerful. I also acknowledge the point made about citizen service, the International Citizen Service and the role that can play in community engagement.

The hon. Member for Brent Central made a powerful speech in which she read out a list of names. There is a live debate about whether we should dignify those people by naming them, and so ensuring that their names recorded for posterity in *Hansard*. I am jealous of her for having as a constituent Raheem Sterling, and I pay tribute to the exceptional work he and others are doing in the world of football.

The 1960 Sharpeville massacre led to the establishment of this international day, but only yesterday I was in Kigali, Rwanda, to mark the 25th anniversary of the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi. As we look across the world today, it is upsetting and absolutely wrong that since 1960 we have continued to witness incidences of intolerance, discrimination and violence on the basis of race, ethnicity and nationality. The hon. Member for Warrington South rightly mentioned incidences of religious hatred, because the horrific cases in New Zealand and the synagogue in Pittsburgh are so fresh in our minds. We all want cohesive communities across this country and in every country in which every individual feels safe from discrimination and hate. We all have a responsibility to fight racial discrimination and strengthen our communities, but, as many have said, Governments have a specific responsibility.

The Prime Minister made clear her determination to tackle racial discrimination from the very first day she took office. The racial disparities audit has revealed racial disparities in our country, and its work in highlighting

them will help to end the inequalities and injustices that members of ethnic minorities can face when they access public services and the jobs market. Every individual should be able to fulfil their potential through their enjoyment of equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities. Since 2017, the Government have taken action in education, employment, health and criminal justice. We have also made strides in our international work. We are determined to root out racial discrimination both at home and abroad.

I reassure all colleagues of the Government's absolute commitment to the total elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. We will continue to tackle these issues both domestically and internationally. We are fully committed to building safe, strong and united communities.

8.58 pm

Faisal Rashid: I am pleased that we have had this debate. It is heartening to see Members from both sides of the House joining in recommitting Parliament to the fight against racism. I thank every Member who spoke or intervened in the debate. I also thank the Minister for her contribution and for reiterating the Government's commitment to fighting racism, although I am a little confused about why the Government felt this issue was within the Foreign Office's remit. Surely it is a matter for the Home Office.

We need to remember that our voices and contributions matter. If our institutions and policies are not doing enough to stem the tide of a resurgence in racism, we need to end complacency. If we in our hearts can imagine a better world, let us keep on fighting for it and eliminate racism from our society forever.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 5) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

9 pm

Mr Speaker: A message has been received from the Lords with Lords amendments relating to the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 5) Bill. The Clerks at the Table advise me that copies of the Lords amendments are available in the Vote Office, online and at the Bills before Parliament website. Also online and in the Vote Office are motions and amendments relating to the Lords amendments, with a selection paper. I should inform the House that none of the Lords amendments engages financial privilege.

Clause 1

DUTIES IN CONNECTION WITH ARTICLE 50 EXTENSION

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Lords amendments 2 to 4.

Lords amendment 5, and amendment (a) thereto.

Yvette Cooper: I should be clear at the beginning that I support all five amendments from the Lords, but I oppose the further Commons amendments that have been tabled. I thank the Lords for proceeding so swiftly in these unprecedented circumstances, with only four days to go until the country could end up leaving without a deal—with all the serious implications for manufacturing, small businesses, medicine supplies, food prices, farming and transport—and with only two days before the important European Council, which needs to consider an extension to article 50.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will give way, but I will be very brief; I want to give the hon. Gentleman time to speak to his amendment.

Sir William Cash: Did the right hon. Lady notice—I watched the proceedings in the House of Lords—the continuous criticisms of this appalling Bill? They said it was a “bad Bill”, “a very bad Bill”—[*Interruption.*] Also, by the way, it is not going to prevent no deal and furthermore, there is nothing that requires, as a matter of law, the avoidance of no deal.

Yvette Cooper: Some people criticised the Bill, but the vast majority of the Lords supported the Bill, which is why we have it back before us now. Parliament has shown in both the Commons and the Lords that it is capable of responding to the gravity and the urgency of the challenge that our country faces and the very immediate risks to jobs, public services and families across the country if we drift. None of us could have imagined that we would be in this situation in the first place. These are unprecedented circumstances, but they should also serve as no precedent for the future when, as we all hope, normality might be restored.

I particularly thank Lord Robertson and Lord Rooker, who sponsored the Bill in the Lords, the Government and Opposition Front Benchers and Cross Benchers, who engaged in thoughtful discussion about these amendments, and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), who did considerable work to ensure that the amendments would be effective. I said to the Minister, when we were discussing this in Committee, that we were keen to ensure that there was legal clarity for the Prime Minister as she went into the negotiations in the EU Council, and that she would be able to take sensible decisions in the national interest without having to come back to this House in the middle of negotiations—clearly, that would not be in the national interest. I welcome the work that has been done together to ensure that that clarity applies and that the Prime Minister can take those discussions forward.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will give way just one more time.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Given that the Bill still says only that the Prime Minister must “seek an extension”, how does this oblige her to accept an extension, or can she refuse one?

Yvette Cooper: The Bill makes it clear that the Prime Minister will be mandated to seek the extension in accordance with the motion that we hope will be tabled tomorrow. As a result of the amendment that has been tabled, it also allows the Prime Minister to seek further extensions and to accept extensions, subject to their not ending earlier than 22 May.

Lords amendments 1 and 2 ensure that a delay past midnight tonight will not prevent debate on the motion tomorrow. Lords amendment 3 allows Ministers other than the Prime Minister to table the motion. I think it sensible to ensure that the debate does not disrupt any negotiations with other Governments in which the Prime Minister will need to engage tomorrow. Lords amendments 4 and 5 ensure that the Prime Minister has that flexibility in the negotiations.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will not. I have given way already, and there is very little time. [*Interruption.*] I will not. I have given way many times.

As I was saying, Lords amendments 4 and 5 enable the Prime Minister to make decisions in the European Council subject to the date not being earlier than 22 May, to ensure that there is no legal uncertainty about the Council’s negotiations and decisions, and to ensure that we do not inadvertently end up with no deal as a result of confusion about the legal process.

I think that, taken together, the Lords amendments improve the Bill. I believe that the House should accept them and resist the Commons amendments, which would have a limiting effect and which would, in fact, conflict with the letter that the Prime Minister has already sent to the European Council. That would not be sensible.

Let me seek one further reassurance from the Minister, which has already been given in the other place. Given that Lords amendments 4 and 5 have been accepted in

[Yvette Cooper]

that place, there is some uncertainty about what might happen should the Prime Minister not achieve any agreement in the European Council deliberations. I hope that the Minister will be able to assure us that in those unusual and exceptional circumstances, which we hope will not arise, the Government would come back to the House immediately with a motion for debate, because obviously we would face the urgent possibility of leaving without a deal. As Ministers know, that has been comprehensively rejected by a huge majority in the House, and it would clearly be unacceptable for the Government simply to allow us to drift into no deal without tabling a further motion before we reach exit day.

These are, of course, unusual and unprecedented circumstances, and I know that there are strong feelings. However, I hope that we have been able to engage in our debates in a thoughtful and considered way. We have just an hour in which to discuss the amendments, and I want to ensure that all Members can express their views.

Sir William Cash: I completely repudiate what has been said by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). The reality is that this outrage is the equivalent of tossing a hand grenade into our constitutional arrangements, given the vital importance of the vote that was delivered by the British people in the referendum. It constitutes a deliberate attempt to undermine that result, and any attempt to say otherwise is a total misrepresentation of the facts.

The Bill will not compel the Prime Minister to do anything that she does not want to do anyway, which is to ask for an extension until 30 June, if we assume that the resolution of the House on Tuesday retains that date. The Bill does not compel her to agree to an extension to a different date, if offered by the European Council, and nor if one is offered with conditions. By the way, that could raise some very serious legal questions, which have not yet been followed through to their ultimate conclusion. Hence, if there is a longer extension, it will be by the Prime Minister's own voluntary act, and not as a result of compulsion by a remain-dominated Parliament, which is what this is. I have said repeatedly during these proceedings that we have a system of parliamentary Government, not government by Parliament. This is a complete reversal of that position; it is a constitutional outrage.

Further, with regard to the European elections, which are dealt with in another amendment on the amendment paper, I would just read out the new clause in my name:

"No extension of the period under Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union may be agreed by the Prime Minister if as a result the United Kingdom would be required to prepare for or to hold elections to the European Parliament."

There are many, many people up and down the country who would totally support that proposition. Furthermore, the reality is that, on Thursday last week, I had a similar amendment on the Order Paper. I was informed that, although it had been selected, No. 10 had given instructions to vote against it. The Government were going to vote against that amendment despite the fact that it was meant to be Government policy. All over the country, there is a firestorm about the fact that we could be involved in European elections. People are leaving their own parties over this because they are so completely infuriated by the fact that the arrangements under consideration here could lead to this absolutely insane

idea of our being involved in European elections. The turnout in European elections is derisory. The European Parliament itself is derisory. There is absolutely no reason on earth why we should be involved in these elections, and that is why I have tabled this new clause.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Why does the hon. Gentleman not offer himself as a candidate and make them all the more exciting?

Sir William Cash: I must admit that if I were to, there would be quite a lot of fireworks in the European Parliament—I can assure the hon. Gentleman of that.

I have no doubt whatever that what those involved are doing by creating circumstances in which the European elections could take place is not only to undermine the vote that was taken in June 2016, but, in addition, to humiliate this country by virtue of the fact this is all effectively being created by our subjugation to the European Union and by our Government crawling on their hands and knees to the European Council—this is something imposed upon them. The idea is not only that we should be put in a position of subjugation but, in terms of the letter the Prime Minister wrote on 5 April, which is a begging letter to the European Council, that we are effectively giving ourselves over to the European Union, which is a humiliation of this country. In no circumstances whatever should we have allowed this ever to happen.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but does he not agree that words such as "humiliation", "submission", "begging", "traitors", "hang them" and "violence" are not appropriate in these types of debate?

Sir William Cash: They most emphatically are, because, unlike what has been going on in this House, which is a perversion and a distortion of our constitutional arrangements, the very essence of our position is to defend democracy, to defend the vote that was taken by the British people, and to stand up for the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, which was passed and is the law of the land. That is where we are right now.

Section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 says that European Communities Act 1972 will be repealed on exit day. All that this Bill does is to move exit day. And by the way, exit day will move, if it ever does, in lockstep with the repeal of the 1972 Act unless someone is prepared to get up and tell me that they intend to repeal the repeal of the 1972 Act. We are still going to repeal that Act, and I think that that is completely lost on Opposition Members.

9.15 pm

There are many other things that I would like to say about this wretched Bill, this abomination. The manner in which it has been done is a constitutional violation. It is not a technical innovation, as some people have tried to pretend; it is a constitutional revolution. Mr Speaker, I remember you referring to a precedent that was set in 1604. As I said the other day, Oliver Cromwell came to this House in the mid-1650s in circumstances in which the House of Commons had turned itself into a rabble. He was so furious with it that he said:

"You have sat too long for any good you have been doing".

That was an accusation—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that the hon. Gentleman is more than capable of looking after himself, so this is no disrespect to him, but he must be heard and he will be heard.

Sir William Cash: So he will, Mr Speaker.

Cromwell continued:

“Depart, I say...In the name of God, go!”

As far as I am concerned, that applies to many Members of Parliament who have reversed their votes and who have repudiated the vote of the British people and denied our democracy.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it really in order for a Member of this House to try to delegitimise other Members of this House, all of whom have our own mandates from our constituencies, simply because he does not agree with what we agree with?

Mr Speaker: It is not procedurally improper. It has offended the sensibilities of a considerable number of colleagues, but my hunch is that the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) will not suffer any loss of sleep as a consequence of that. The hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) has made her point was considerable force, and it is on the record. Had the hon. Gentleman concluded his oration?

Sir William Cash: One last remark, Mr Speaker. I trust that the hon. Member for Wallasey will reflect on the fact that, as far as I am aware, she voted for the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017 when this House passed it by 499 votes to about 120. That is a fact—[*Interruption.*] But perhaps she did not, so she can tell me about that.

Ms Eagle: Indeed I did vote for that Act, but I did not expect the hon. Gentleman’s Prime Minister to make such a hash of it. We have to go back to the beginning, start again and do it properly.

Sir William Cash: In conclusion, I would simply say that I, too, think that the Prime Minister has made a hash of it. It makes no difference to me. I have said it repeatedly, and I will say it again and again.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): First, I should like to say to the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) that the reason we are debating this Bill again tonight is that the House of Commons has approved it and the other place has approved it with amendments. If that is a constitutional revolution, it is a constitutional revolution courtesy of the democratic will of this House and the other place. Secondly, on the subject of the European elections, the Government have made it quite clear to the House that if we are still a member of the European Union on 23 May, those elections will take place. Indeed, the Government have moved the order that will start the process and I understand that the Conservative party has started the process of calling for candidates to stand in those elections.

I rise to support my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and to thank them, because the Bill has helped

us get to the place, subject to the decision of the European Council on Wednesday, where the will of the House to oppose leaving the European Union without an agreement will finally be given effect. The House needs to remember that the Bill has one purpose, and one purpose only: it is a “prevention of a no-deal Brexit” Bill. If the House gives its approval to it shortly, it will become a “prevention of a no-deal Brexit” Act.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Can the right hon. Gentleman just read out the text of the Bill that will oblige the Prime Minister to accept an extension when she attends the Council of Ministers?

Hilary Benn: The Prime Minister will accept an extension because she has asked for one. It is the existence of this Bill that has led her, in advance of the Bill being approved by the House, to write to the President of the European Council seeking an extension, because twice, much to the unhappiness of certain Members on the Government side of the House, she has been faced with this choice: either to take the country over the edge of a no-deal cliff, or to apply for an extension.

The reason I think some Members are very cross about that—I accept that they are cross—is that on both occasions the Prime Minister, facing both this Bill and a revolt by her Ministers, decided to act in the national interest by making that application. I hope very much that on Wednesday the European Council will grant more time, because whatever one thinks about the Prime Minister’s deal, one thing is clear: a no-deal Brexit would be disastrous for our country. That is why I hope the House will vote for the Bill tonight.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): May I begin by saying how pleased I was to learn, when my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) mentioned the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017, that so many Opposition Members voted for that Act on the basis that they took on trust the success of a Conservative Prime Minister? I am pleased that they have so much confidence in us. When they voted for that Act, they either did or did not know the terms of article 50. If they did know the terms, then they voted to leave the European Union potentially without a withdrawal agreement; and if they did not, then clearly they were ignorant of one of the most important matters of the moment. Perhaps instead they were just voting for short-term political expediency. In any event, it is not very credible for Members now to be panicking and seeking to overturn what they previously legislated for, with great care and over a considerable period of time.

I turn my attention to Lords amendment 5, which I find rather surprising, because it seeks to restore the prerogative to the Government, provided they seek a long extension. Of course, this House resoundingly defeated the Government on that very point. I am therefore very pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Stone has tabled amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 5, to rule out European elections. It states:

“No extension of the period under Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union may be agreed by the Prime Minister if as a result the United Kingdom would be required to prepare for or to hold elections to the European Parliament.”

This House united around what was known as the Brady amendment, to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements. I cannot think how many times I and

[Mr Steve Baker]

other Members have tabled the so-called Malthouse compromise, to limit the implementation period, replace the backstop and, in the latest incarnation, get rid of the single customs territory. We have tried and tried to give the Government the way to get a deal.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am listening carefully to what my hon. Friend says about amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 5. Let us be absolutely clear. Is he saying that anyone who votes against amendment (a) will actually be voting for the United Kingdom to take part in the European elections, despite the fact that nearly every Member of this House voted for us to leave long before that date? It is a big reverse, is it not?

Mr Baker: It is a big reverse. Do Opposition Members seriously think that we should participate in the European elections after so long? It is a ridiculous escapade. Members should have known what they were doing when they voted to trigger article 50—[*Interruption.*] I see the right hon. Gentleman the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee looking quizzical and shaking his head, or perhaps nodding along.

Hilary Benn: I am listening.

Mr Baker: I am delighted that he is, but I think he voted to notify the EU of our withdrawal. If he did, he voted to leave without an agreement.

The fundamental point of the amendments to Lords amendment 5 is that the time has come, after every effort that we have made to enable the Government to secure a withdrawal agreement to which this House could give its assent, to say enough is enough. The Government should reject Lords amendment 5, accept the amendment in lieu from my hon. Friend the Member for Stone and move heaven and earth to get out on Friday without a withdrawal agreement.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on bringing us this Bill. I had not intended to speak this evening, but I was slightly shocked by the speech from the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who started by saying that everything we were doing was undemocratic and then proceeded to give us four or five clearly democratic examples that he was attempting to make undemocratic.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) wondered how it could be a democratic outrage, in the words of the hon. Member for Stone, to have both this House and the other place vote for a piece of legislation in the democratic fashion that we have used for many hundreds of years.

Sir William Cash: May I just point out to the hon. Gentleman that the European Union Referendum Act 2015, which this House passed by six to one, deliberately and exclusively gave the people the right, by sovereign Act of Parliament, to make the decision themselves? That was us giving the people the right to make that decision, and the hon. Gentleman and others are now trying to retrieve that decision from the British people, which is totally undemocratic.

Ian Murray: If the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene again and tell me about one promise made at the 2016 referendum that still stands today, I will happily accept his argument. We are here only because his Government and his Prime Minister have created the biggest mess in parliamentary history in a hung Parliament—one that was made hung by his Prime Minister gambling with a 33 majority and losing. Everything changed at the 2017 general election, but he forgets that.

The hon. Gentleman went on to talk about it being undemocratic to hold European elections. It is apparently undemocratic to ask the entire country to go to a polling station to vote in a democratic election when it is the right of people across Europe, by treaty, to go to a booth to put their cross in a box. How can that be undemocratic?

How can it be undemocratic to try to prevent a no-deal scenario? This is the worst thing of all. This House has voted on at least three occasions by a vast majority to prevent a no-deal scenario, so it is perfectly democratic for the House to take charge of the business and pass legislation to ensure that no deal does not happen. That is perfectly and utterly democratic.

Ms Angela Eagle: Does my hon. Friend agree that there was no word during the referendum itself from those suggesting that we leave the European Union that we should leave without a deal and plunge our economy off a cliff?

Ian Murray: I hate to quote the leave campaign, but I think Mr Hannan himself said that nobody was considering leaving the single market. Indeed, the whole campaign was predicated on having the easiest trade deal in history, on 40 trade deals rolling over by 29 March, on a Brexit dividend, and on an extra £350 million a week for the NHS, but none of that has come to pass.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a sad indictment of where we have reached that Peter Osborne, who describes himself as a “strong Brexiteer”, said over the weekend:

“Now we must swallow our pride and think again”?

He was one of the 17.4 million who voted for Brexit but he now says:

“I have to admit that the Brexit project has gone sour”

and that it will “make us poorer”. It is not just remainers who support the Bill; leavers are also saying, “This isn’t what we voted for. This isn’t the state of a nation that we recognise.” It is time for us to take a step back and not rush to a decision that we will regret.

9.30 pm

Ian Murray: I am grateful for that intervention. To paraphrase a former Secretary of State, a democracy fails to be a democracy if the public are not allowed to change their mind. That is exactly what people have been doing. [*Interruption.*]

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has mentioned on a number of occasions the hundreds of years of activity in and decisions taken by this place. Can he give one example of when such an important constitutional Bill has been rammed through this House with fewer than four hours of debate?

Ian Murray: Time is of the essence. If the Bill had not been put through this House with four hours of debate, it would not have made it in time for the European Council on Wednesday. In actual fact, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford should be thanked by the Prime Minister for this Bill.

SNP Members are jumping up and down because I said that a democracy fails to be a democracy if the public are not allowed to change their mind. Actually, the public of Scotland have not changed their mind on independence. Indeed, they are more against it—*[Interruption.]* I have probably just set the cat among the nationalist pigeons.

I have a lot of respect for the hon. Member for Stone because he has always held his views about the European Union. We have to respect those views, listen to them and agree to disagree—we will definitely do that—but what is undemocratic is for Members to table amendments to trash a Bill that has gone democratically through this House and the other place to put democratically into law the prevention of no deal. That is what is undemocratic, which is why we should support the Lords amendments.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Many people outside this House are losing confidence and trust in us and our proceedings. Tonight is another plunge in how they see us, because we are behaving collectively so badly. My right hon. and hon. Friends who have complained about the lack of time for debating both the Bill and the amendments are quite right. This is a serious constitutional matter. We have not been given time to construct proper amendments and there is no time in this brief hour to do justice to the complex issues raised by the Lords amendments. We had but a short debate on the original consideration of the Bill, when I was able to set out some of the constitutional difficulties involved in groups of MPs seizing the agenda and taking over money resolution and Crown prerogative matters, and we are not allowed proper time tonight to consider exactly how all that fits with this Bill.

What we do know, however, is that the very slim majority who have got the Bill this far through this House intend to go against the clearly expressed wishes of the British people in the referendum. All those who voted to leave, two years and nine months ago, had every reason to suppose that all Labour and Conservative Members elected on their 2017 manifestos would see through our exit in a timely way. They should also have expected that from the promises made by both the leave and the remain campaigns in the referendum, the legislation put through in granting that referendum, and the clear statement of the Government at the time, who said that we would implement the wishes of the British people. The Opposition did not dissent from that particular view when the Government put out their leaflet. Indeed, during the remain campaign many Labour MPs endorsed the Government. That is why tonight is another sad night. This Parliament is breaking its word, breaking its promises and letting down 17.4 million voters, but it is also letting down quite a lot of remain voters.

A lot of remain voters are good democrats who fully accept the verdict of the British people. Quite a lot of people in our country were only just remain voters or only just leave voters and are prepared to live with the judgment of the majority, and they now, too, are scandalised

that this Parliament is insisting on a second needless delay when we have had two years and nine months to prepare for exit and when our Government assure us that they are fully prepared for exiting without signing the withdrawal agreement.

I find it very odd that Members of this House think that the withdrawal agreement is, in itself, Brexit or in any way helps Brexit because, of course, the withdrawal agreement is a massively long delay to our exit, with the added problem, which the Opposition have rightly identified, that it entails signing up to a solemn and binding international treaty to undermine our bargaining position in the second part of the negotiations envisaged by the EU's process.

Sir William Cash: My right hon. Friend is making an extremely good speech. Is he aware that, as I have been informed today, the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill, which is supposed to put this appalling withdrawal agreement into domestic law, is around 120 pages long? That is what we are heading for in the next couple of weeks.

John Redwood: My hon. Friend is right. The nature of that solemn and binding treaty will be to lock us in, for 21 or 45 months, to every feature of the European Union without representation, vote or voice, and it might mean that we end up in large sections of it—the customs union and single market alignment—in perpetuity, thanks to the Irish backstop.

It is a massive delay, and I say to my hon. and right hon. Friends on the Front Bench that, if they are offering the public either a guaranteed delay under the withdrawal agreement or a shorter delay that they wish to negotiate, a lot of leave voters would rather have the shorter delay but, of course, all of us leave voters do not want any delay at all. That is why people will be scandalised by what this House is rushing through again this evening.

The shortage of time is completely scandalous. This is a massive issue that has gripped the nation for many months. It dominates the news media, it sucks the life out of this House on every other issue and now, when we come to this big crunch event and when leave had been led to believe that we would be leaving the European Union without an agreement if necessary, they are told at the last minute, for the second time, that all their hopes for their democratic outcome will be dashed again. This Parliament does that with grave danger to its reputation.

I urge all those who wish to get this lightning legislation through again to ask themselves what they are going to say to all their leave voters, and what they are going to say to their remain voters who are also democrats and who join leave voters in saying, “Get on with it. Get it over with. Why do we have to sit through month after month of the same people making the same points that they put to a referendum and lost?”

This Parliament needs to wake up and get real. It needs to move on, it needs to rise to the nation's requirements and deal with the nation's other business, and it needs to accept that this was decided by the public. It is our duty to implement it. Leaving without this agreement is going to be just fine. We are prepared for it. Business is ready for it. Business has spent money. Business has done whatever it needed to do and, in many cases, feels very let down that it is not able to use all its contingencies, on which it has spent good money.

[*John Redwood*]

I would say this to all Labour MPs, particularly those with a majority of leave voters in their constituency: understand the damage you are doing, understand the damage you are doing to this institution, understand the damage you are doing to our democracy and vote for us to leave the European Union.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It really is no good Government Members complaining about the lack of time—the lack of time to debate this Bill or the fact that we are days away from crashing out of the European Union with no deal. In fact, we would have done that already, were it not for the interventions of people from all parts of this House and in the other place.

Why are we in this position? There is some serious revisionist history going on tonight. It is because after the referendum, a Parliament in which a majority of Members voted to remain none the less said, “We accept that people have voted to leave the European Union.” When the Prime Minister—after she had been dragged through the courts, incidentally—was eventually forced to ask for permission to trigger article 50 and begin the process of negotiations, as has been said, the vast majority of MPs, myself included, voted to give the Prime Minister that permission. That was Parliament’s sole role in the matter: being asked for permission and giving the Prime Minister permission.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): When Parliament voted for article 50 to be activated, surely Members knew that we would leave after an agreement had been reached or after two years—or did they not bother reading article 50?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman will be aware from our time together on the Treasury Committee that we knew what the timeline was for the negotiations. What we could not have foreseen was that the Prime Minister would be so irresponsible, when given the authority to trigger article 50, to send that letter without first having agreement within her Cabinet, within her party and across the House. We also could not have foreseen—not least because she promised repeatedly that she would not do it—that she would have wasted a significant proportion of that two years on a general election.

In the election, the Prime Minister asked the country in explicit and personal terms to give her the mandate that she needed for a hard Brexit of the kind that many Government Members now demand. What did the public say? They said no. They did not give the Prime Minister the majority she asked for. The Conservative party lost seats and the country decided that no one party could be trusted with a majority to govern. That should bring humility on all of us. It also required a degree of contrition and compromise, but we have not seen any of that from the Prime Minister until the 11th hour.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): My hon. Friend has pointed out that the Conservatives lost seats in the 2017 general election. Will he also give credit to the Labour party for taking seats, including my own, Vale of Clwyd?

Wes Streeting: I absolutely do. Let me also say, as a Member of Parliament whose constituency split virtually down the middle, that there is a range of reasons why people voted in the way they did in the general election, because general elections are not single-issue democratic events. However, I can say that people in Ilford North were very worried about what a Conservative Government would bring to the country, not least because of the position that the Prime Minister staked out on Europe.

I made it very clear to my constituents that I believed that any deal should be put back to the people. That has been a consistent democratic principle. I did not know at the general election that we would be in the position we are now in: not just in the last chance saloon but on last orders. It seems that the Prime Minister is literally on last orders, as she is there just before they boot her out.

Ms Angela Eagle: Does my hon. Friend agree that the one thing the election pointed out was that there was not a majority for a hard Brexit, and that if the Prime Minister had recognised that and reached out at that moment, we would all be in a much better position than we find ourselves in?

Wes Streeting: The Prime Minister has never sought to compromise. What she has found difficult—and what any Prime Minister would find difficult—is trying to reconcile the broad range of promises that were made to people in 2016 and the inability to deliver them all. That is entirely due to the fact that the leave campaign was never honest about the tension at the heart of its offer, which was that there is a trade-off between national sovereignty and economic trade and partnership, economic security and national security. We have been great beneficiaries of pooled sovereignty, but if we try to unpool sovereignty there are trade-offs and sacrifices. The leave campaign has never been honest about that.

The final thing I want to say is about the European elections. The idea that we would decide our country’s future, not just for the next year or two but for generations, around the inconvenience of organising European elections is nonsensical. There has never been a clamour for European elections. In fact, lots of the country is currently with Brenda from Bristol on the idea of any election: “Not another one!” I find this idea that holding elections or a confirmatory vote is undemocratic to be laughable. How can involving all our country in decisions about our future possibly be anti-democratic? The idea that we would rush to judgment, crash out with no deal and make decisions that will hurt this country for generations to come because we cannot be bothered to go out and knock on a few doors is no basis on which to make a decision. We should vote against the amendment.

9.45 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to make a few comments on tonight’s debate. Like the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) who sponsored the Bill, we will support the Lords amendments. From our point of view, they have tidied up some of the wording in the main subsections, and they have put the original drafting into more effective and tighter wording.

I want to pick up on some of the questions that have been asked across the Chamber. Has such a major constitutional change ever been rushed through in such

a hurry? English votes for English laws is the most significant constitutional change in the past 30 years, and that did not even have an Act of Parliament before being put through. The Westminster power grab, driving a coach and horses through the devolution settlement, had 19 minutes of debate. The entire Scottish contingent of 59 MPs were allowed one word during that debate. We were allowed to say, “No”, and then we were outvoted. So the ERG should not talk to anyone on our Benches about the lack of democratic process.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: Thanks to the hon. Gentleman’s friends, I have little time to speak and I do not want to take up time that the Minister will want towards the end.

The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), whom I have a great deal of respect for, for the length of service that he has given to this House, simply got his facts wrong. He spoke about when Oliver Cromwell addressed this Parliament. Oliver Cromwell had been dead for 50 years before this Parliament existed. That is even if “this Parliament” means the Parliament of Great Britain, because the Parliament of the United Kingdom did not come along for another 100 years after that. Even with the protection of the Almighty, Oliver Cromwell would not have smelt too nice if he had come here 150 years later.

As for the nonsense that because an Act of Parliament was passed in a previous Parliament, this Parliament does not like to do anything about it, what happened to the sacred principle that no Parliament can bind a successor? If that principle did not exist, we would not need elections at all, but some people on the Conservative Benches think that having elections is some kind of democratic outrage—“They shouldn’t be allowed”, or, “People don’t need the chance to change their minds.”

The same people also say that in the 2017 election, over 80% of people voted for the two major UK parties whose manifestos said they would respect the result of the referendum—I think that was a mistake by Labour, but it cannot be changed now. In 2015, however, 85% of people voted for parties that said they wanted to stay in the European Union. How can it be that between 2015 and 2017, 80% of the people were allowed to change their minds, but between 2016 and 2019, 3% are not allowed to change their minds?

As for that idea that everyone knew what they were doing in 2016, no less a person than the Attorney General admitted this weekend that he had misunderstood and that the Government had underestimated just how complicated it was going to be. If the Government’s chief legal adviser did not realise how complicated it was going to be, what chance did 33 million other people have in casting their votes?

It is right that Labour supported article 50 at the time, but Labour made a lot of mistakes at the start of the process—serious tactical mistakes—and I am pleased that a lot of them are coming around to understand and to make good those mistakes. I am a bit worried that their leader might be about to make the biggest tactical mistake on Brexit of the whole lot, but I hope he can be pulled back from that.

The single biggest difficulty, as has been said, is that the Prime Minister has made a mess of the negotiations from day one. Conservative Members complain about the number of times that she promised, “We’re leaving on 29 March”, as if that was some kind of day handed down on tablets of stone from Mount Sinai, but it is just another example of the Prime Minister creating utterly impossible expectations. I am sorry, but if the Prime Minister’s impossible expectations cause problems for the Conservative party, that is not my problem, and I want to see the day when it is no longer Scotland’s problem.

Far too much of the debate about Brexit has not been about what is in the best interests of this generation; it has paid no regard at all to the interests of future generations—it has been all about what is in the best interests of the Conservative party. It might be best for us all if the Conservative party’s existential crisis came to its natural conclusion and the rest of us could get on with building a better nation, a better set of nations and a better society for us and our descendants.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thought I would inject a new tone into the debate and focus on the amendments. I will be brief.

I thank the peers for their work on the Bill in an exceptionally short time, reflecting the exceptional circumstances in which we find ourselves. Since we last debated it, the Prime Minister has—later than we would have liked—reached out to the Opposition, and we are engaging fully in that process. In that spirit, we are pleased to join the Government in accepting all the amendments. Amendments 1 to 3 tidy up the Bill to ensure that the motion is put to the House tomorrow. Amendment 5 makes a significant but helpful change to the Bill. Events have overtaken us since it was presented last week, and the Prime Minister has already written to the President of the European Council indicating her intention to seek an extension to the article 50 process until 30 June.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House what there is in the Bill that the Prime Minister has not already said she will do in relation to an article 50 extension? Given that she has already said that she will seek an article 50 extension, is it not the case that this entire Bill is nothing more than an extended vanity exercise?

Paul Blomfield: I assume that, in that case, the hon. Gentleman has no objection to the Bill.

The other important development since last week is that the Prime Minister has made clear her opposition to leaving the European Union without a deal. Amendment 5 enables her to agree to a different extension provided that it is a date after 22 May.

Amendment 4 deletes clause 1(6) and (7). Like other Members, I am conscious that last week this House voted against an identical amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). However, that deletion must now be read alongside amendment 5. These amendments, taken together in the Lords, were tabled in recognition that time is of the essence if we are to avoid leaving the European Union without a deal on Friday. We therefore now support amendment 4. We oppose the amendments

[Paul Blomfield]

tabled by Conservative Members that repeat attempts made last week and seek to frustrate the objectives of the Bill.

Finally, I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) for their work on the Bill. I thank the staff of both Houses for everything they have done to enable speedy consideration of it.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I regret that we are debating this Bill, as it is unnecessary and has been progressed through Parliament without due and necessary time for debate or scrutiny. I share the view of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that it is a matter of deep regret that we are considering the Bill this evening. Given that the other place has given it a great deal more consideration than this House, we should reflect on its amendments.

As the House is aware, the Government have already set in train the process to achieve a short extension. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) pointed out, the Bill is not necessary to do that. When this House approved the Bill, I pointed out that it was being passed in haste. We had a heavily truncated Second Reading, a short Committee stage and no debate on Report or Third Reading. That was followed by an unusually expedited process in the other place, where there was an unprecedented use, much remarked on by the noble Lords, of closure motions during the debate on the business motion. No Government or Parliament should welcome this unhealthy state of affairs.

John Redwood: What is the point of the delay that the Prime Minister is seeking and this Bill wants? Would the EU use it to renegotiate the agreement?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister has been very clear that she is seeking the shortest possible extension to make sure that we leave in an orderly fashion with a deal.

My Secretary of State suggested on Second Reading that the House of Lords—the other place—might wish to correct the flaws in the Bill. The combined effect of the Lords amendments is to correct deficiencies in the drafting and to mitigate some of the severe impacts that the Bill could otherwise have triggered. Like the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), I will address each of the amendments in turn.

The amendments tabled to clause 1 in the name of the noble Lord Robertson—Lords amendments 1 to 3—reduce the chance of an inadvertent no deal. As I pointed out in Committee, the Bill as originally drafted “creates a real risk that we could be timed out and be unable to agree an extension with our European partners and implement it in domestic law.”—[*Official Report*, 3 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 1189.] The Bill requires that motion to be moved on the day after Royal Assent. If we run past midnight, that would mean that we were debating the motion on Wednesday, the same day as the Council.

The noble Lord has identified a further flaw in the drafting whereby—at page 1, line 2—it states that only the Prime Minister can move a motion in the House of

Commons in the form set out in this Bill. Members of the House will be familiar with the fact that the usual drafting states a “Minister of the Crown”. In seeking to restrict the moving of this motion to just the Prime Minister, it would mean that the Prime Minister could not travel on Wednesday until after 1 pm, when she would be required to move the motion, disrupting discussions with EU leaders ahead of Council. The House will appreciate the importance of the Prime Minister meeting European leaders before the Council and the need to be ready to make the case for an extension. It is difficult to see how frustrating this process would help the UK to obtain a positive outcome. As such, the Government support these amendments.

Lords amendment 4, tabled in the name of the noble Lord Goldsmith, removed clause 1(6) and (7) of the Bill, requiring the Prime Minister to return to Parliament after the European Council to seek agreement to the length of the extension. We did consider a version of this amendment in this House, moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), but those on the Opposition Benches voted against it. We are now in a situation where Labour peers are once again correcting the errors that were inherent in the original Bill. If subsections (6) and (7) were allowed to stand, we would need to return to the House and seek its approval for an extension on Thursday, even if that extension had already been agreed on Wednesday. That simply does not make sense.

Mr Bone: The excellent Minister is right that the amendment was moved in this House and roundly defeated. In fact, the whole point of the Bill originally was that Parliament took control of the date. For some reason I cannot understand, that has now been abandoned, which makes this Bill totally irrelevant. Of course, we can vote how we like today because it will not make any difference, will it, Minister? The Prime Minister now has the authority to do what she likes.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. I have already pointed out that I think this Bill is unnecessary. The effect of these amendments is to restore the power of the royal prerogative, so I think I can agree with him on that. Of course—and I say this to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who made this point—if an extension were not agreed, the Prime Minister would want to come back to the House at the earliest opportunity to set out the next steps.

Yvette Cooper: Will the Minister assure me that that would be before exit day in those circumstances?

Mr Walker: Yes, I say to the right hon. Lady that it would have to be.

Lords amendment 5, tabled in the name of Cross-Bench peer the noble Lord Pannick, reinstates the form of a previous amendment that I proposed in this House, and which was opposed by the backers of the Bill. It seeks to retain the royal prerogative, which gives the Prime Minister, as a matter of constitutional principle, the discretion to decide what is the best agreement to reach on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government. It is a pillar of our constitution, and the means to govern this country effectively and unencumbered.

Lords amendment 5 adds a proviso that any extension agreed should not end earlier than 22 May. Of course, the Government have already been clear that we are seeking an extension to 30 June, so that is no threat to the prerogative power. I spoke in support of the prerogative power in Committee, and the noble Lord Howard and the noble Lord Cormack were united in speaking in its support in the other place. As Member for the Faithful City, I am happy to continue to speak in its support.

While I have great sympathy for amendment (a) to Lords amendment 5, tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Stone (Sir William Cash) and for Wycombe (Mr Baker)—I entirely agree with the sentiment—the Government have already set out our desire for an extension to 30 June to allow the maximum time to secure an orderly exit from the European Union.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: I am afraid that I cannot give way because I am going to run out of time. I apologise to my hon. Friend.

We cannot support this amendment (a), but the Government have also been clear that it is our firm desire to secure an agreement and leave the EU by 22 May to ensure that we do not need to hold European elections. In voting for the withdrawal agreement at the last opportunity, I and the vast majority of Government Members voted to do so. Despite our continued opposition to the Bill, its irrelevance and the speed of its passage in haste, we are left with no choice but to improve it, so I support the amendments before the House that were passed in the other place.

10 pm

One hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments, the proceedings were interrupted (Order, 3 April).

The Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83F), That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Question agreed to.

Lords amendment 1 accordingly agreed to.

The Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Question put, That this House agrees with Lords amendments 2 and 3.

The House divided: Ayes 396, Noes 83.

Division No. 410]

[10 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Bardell, Hannah
Abrahams, Debbie	Bebb, Guto
Afolami, Bim	Beckett, rh Margaret
Aldous, Peter	Bellingham, Sir Henry
Ali, Rushanara	Benn, rh Hilary
Allen, Heidi	Berger, Luciana (<i>Proxy vote</i>
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	<i>cast by Mr Chris Leslie)</i>
Amesbury, Mike	Berry, Jake
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Betts, Mr Clive
Argar, Edward	Black, Mhairi
Ashworth, Jonathan	Blackford, rh Ian
Austin, Ian	Blackman, Kirsty
Barclay, rh Stephen	Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta

Blomfield, Paul	Dowd, Peter
Boles, Nick	Dowden, Oliver
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Dromey, Jack
Bowie, Andrew	Duffield, Rosie
Brabin, Tracy	Duguid, David
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Eagle, Ms Angela
Brake, rh Tom	Eagle, Maria
Brennan, Kevin	Edwards, Jonathan
Brine, Steve	Efford, Clive
Brock, Deidre	Elliott, Julie
Brown, Alan	Ellman, Dame Louise
Brown, Lyn	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Elmore, Chris
Bruce, Fiona	Esterson, Bill
Bryant, Chris	Evans, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen	Farrelly, Paul
Buckland, Robert	Farron, Tim
Burden, Richard	Fellows, Marion
Burghart, Alex	Field, rh Mark
Burgon, Richard	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Burt, rh Alistair	Fletcher, Colleen
Butler, Dawn	Ford, Vicky
Byrne, rh Liam	Foster, Kevin
Cable, rh Sir Vince	Foxcroft, Vicky
Cairns, rh Alun	Frazer, Lucy
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Freeman, George
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Freer, Mike
Carden, Dan	Furniss, Gill
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Gaffney, Hugh
Cartlidge, James	Gapes, Mike
Chalk, Alex	Gardiner, Barry
Chapman, Douglas	Garnier, Mark
Chapman, Jenny	George, Ruth
Charalambous, Bambos	Gethins, Stephen
Cherry, Joanna	Gibb, rh Nick
Clark, Colin	Gibson, Patricia
Clark, rh Greg	Gill, Preet Kaur
Cleverly, James	Glen, John
Clwyd, rh Ann	Glindon, Mary
Coaker, Vernon	Godsiff, Mr Roger
Coffey, Ann	Goodman, Helen
Collins, Damian	Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Cooper, rh Yvette	Grady, Patrick
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Graham, Luke
Costa, Alberto	Graham, Richard
Cowan, Ronnie	Grant, Bill
Coyle, Neil	Grant, Peter
Crabb, rh Stephen	Gray, Neil
Crausby, Sir David	Green, rh Damian
Crawley, Angela	Green, Kate
Creagh, Mary	Greening, rh Justine
Creasy, Stella	Greenwood, Margaret
Cruddas, Jon	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Cryer, John	Griffith, Nia
Cummins, Judith	Grogan, John
Cunningham, Alex	Gwynne, Andrew
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Gyimah, Mr Sam
Daby, Janet	Halfon, rh Robert
Davey, rh Sir Edward	Hall, Luke
David, Wayne	Hamilton, Fabian
Davies, Chris	Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Davies, Geraint	Hammond, Stephen
Davies, Glyn	Hanson, rh David
Day, Martyn	Hardy, Emma
De Cordova, Marsha	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
De Piero, Gloria	Harrington, Richard
Debbonaire, Thangam	Harris, Carolyn
Dent Coad, Emma	Harris, Rebecca
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hart, Simon
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Hayes, Helen
Dodds, Anneliese	Hayman, Sue
Doughty, Stephen	Healey, rh John

Heaton-Jones, Peter
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hinds, rh Damian
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Javid, rh Sajid
Johnson, Diana
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Darren (*Proxy vote cast by Kerry McCarthy*)
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keegan, Gillian
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerr, Stephen
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Mr Chris
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lidington, rh Mr David
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lopresti, Jack
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Maclean, Rachel
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana

Mak, Alan
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Maynard, Paul
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Miliband, rh Edward
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Ian
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newlands, Gavin
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norris, Alex
O'Brien, Neil
O'Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opperman, Guy
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pawsey, Mark
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Penrose, John
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Philp, Chris
Pidcock, Laura
Pincher, rh Christopher
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Pow, Rebecca
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina

Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Rutley, David
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft*)
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stone, Jamie
Streeter, Sir Gary

Streeting, Wes
Sturdy, Julian
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Throup, Maggie
Timms, rh Stephen
Tomlinson, Justin
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Mr Robin
Walker, Thelma
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whittaker, Craig
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Wright, rh Jeremy
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jo Churchill and
Michelle Donelan

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Amess, Sir David
Baker, Mr Steve
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bradley, Ben
Braverman, Suella
Bridgen, Andrew
Burns, Conor
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Courts, Robert
Davis, rh Mr David
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Mr Nigel
Fabricant, Michael

Francois, rh Mr Mark
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Griffiths, Andrew
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Henderson, Gordon
Hoey, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hughes, Eddie
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jones, rh Mr David
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mann, Scott

Mills, Nigel
 Moore, Damien
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Paisley, Ian
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Shannon, Jim
 Simpson, David
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston

Stewart, Bob
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Noes:
Richard Drax and
Craig Mackinlay

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 and 3 agreed to.

Lords amendment 4 agreed to.

Amendment (a) proposed to Lords amendment 5.

—(*Sir William Cash.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 85, Noes 392.

Division No. 411]

[10.18 pm

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
 Amess, Sir David
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Blackman, Bob
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Braverman, Suella
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Burns, Conor
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cash, Sir William
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Courts, Robert
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Double, Steve
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Hughes, Eddie
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil

Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mann, Scott
 Mills, Nigel
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Paisley, Ian
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Shannon, Jim
 Simpson, David
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Stewart, Bob
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Vara, Mr Shailesh

Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Watling, Giles
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill

Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Ayes:
Richard Drax and
Craig Mackinlay

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Afolami, Bim
 Aldous, Peter
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allen, Heidi
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Argar, Edward
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Austin, Ian
 Barclay, rh Stephen
 Bardell, Hannah
 Bebb, Guto
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Chris Leslie)
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Boles, Nick
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brine, Steve
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bruce, Fiona
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Buckland, Robert
 Burden, Richard
 Burghart, Alex
 Burgon, Richard
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cable, rh Sir Vince
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartledge, James
 Chalk, Alex
 Chapman, Douglas
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg

Cleverly, James
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Collins, Damian
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crausby, Sir David
 Crawley, Angela
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies, Glyn
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Dowden, Oliver
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Eford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Dame Louise
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Field, rh Mark
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George

Freer, Mike
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Ruth
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glen, John
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Green, rh Damian
 Green, Kate
 Greening, rh Justine
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hermon, Lady
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Johnson, Diana
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew

Jones, Darren (*Proxy vote cast by Kerry McCarthy*)
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keegan, Gillian
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kerr, Stephen
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Maclean, Rachel
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Mak, Alan
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Maynard, Paul
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Milling, Amanda
 Milton, rh Anne
 Monaghan, Carol

Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Ian
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newlands, Gavin
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norris, Alex
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onasanya, Fiona
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Philp, Chris
 Pidcock, Laura
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Pow, Rebecca
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Rutley, David
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin

Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft*)
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Snell, Gareth
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spellar, rh John
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Streeting, Wes
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Swinson, Jo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Walker, Thelma
 Warman, Matt
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jo Churchill and
Michelle Donelan

Question accordingly negated.

Question put, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 5.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 390, Noes 81.

Division No. 412]

[10.35 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Afolami, Bim
Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Argar, Edward
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Barclay, rh Stephen
Bardell, Hannah
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Chris Leslie)
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brine, Steve
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bruce, Fiona
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Buckland, Robert
Burden, Richard
Burghart, Alex
Burgon, Richard
Burt, rh Alistair
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cairns, rh Alun
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartledge, James
Chalk, Alex
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverly, James
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon

Coffey, Ann
Collins, Damian
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Chris
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Glyn
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dowden, Oliver
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Mark
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen

Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glen, John
Glendon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, rh Damian
Green, Kate
Greening, rh Justine
Greenwood, Margaret
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hamilton, Fabian
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Carolyn
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hinds, rh Damian
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Javid, rh Sajid
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Darren (*Proxy vote*
cast by Kerry McCarthy)
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan

Kane, Mike
Keegan, Gillian
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerr, Stephen
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammey, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Mr Chris
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lidington, rh Mr David
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lopresti, Jack
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Maclean, Rachel
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Mak, Alan
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Maynard, Paul
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Miliband, rh Edward
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Ian

Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newlands, Gavin
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norris, Alex
O'Brien, Neil
O'Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pawsey, Mark
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Penrose, John
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Philp, Chris
Pidcock, Laura
Pincher, rh Christopher
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Pow, Rebecca
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Rutley, David
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote cast
by Vicky Foxcroft*)
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat

Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stone, Jamie
Streeter, Sir Gary
Streeting, Wes
Sturdy, Julian
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Syms, Sir Robert
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Throup, Maggie
Timms, rh Stephen
Tomlinson, Justin
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Mr Robin
Walker, Thelma
Warman, Matt
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Wright, rh Jeremy
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Jo Churchill and
Michelle Donelan**

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Amess, Sir David
Baker, Mr Steve
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bradley, Ben
Braverman, Suella

Bridgen, Andrew
Burns, Conor
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey

Courts, Robert
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Mr Nigel
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Griffiths, Andrew
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Henderson, Gordon
Hoey, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hughes, Eddie
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jones, rh Mr David
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lopez, Julia
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mann, Scott
Mills, Nigel
Morris, Anne Marie
Murray, Mrs Sheryll

Paisley, Ian
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Shannon, Jim
Simpson, David
Smith, Henry
Smith, Royston
Stewart, Bob
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Watling, Giles
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Noes:
**Richard Drax and
Craig Mackinlay**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 5 agreed to.

Business without Debate

HOME AFFAIRS

Motion made,

That Alex Norris and John Woodcock be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Janet Daby and Toby Perkins be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

JUSTICE

Motion made,

That Janet Daby be discharged from the Justice Committee and Andy Slaughter be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Mr Robert Goodwill be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Sir Desmond Swayne be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Motion made,

That Mr Gavin Shuker be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Stephanie Peacock be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Both Houses of Parliament have tonight strongly made clear their view that a no deal would be deeply damaging to jobs, manufacturing and the security of our country, and they have also set out support for the Prime Minister in securing an agreement later this week. But these are unprecedented circumstances, so can I please put on record my strong thanks to the Clerks of the House who have made it possible for us to put forward this cross-party legislation in these very unusual circumstances? We are hugely grateful for the Clerks' expertise, without which it would not be possible for any Back Bencher or any Member to propose amendments or legislation in any form. That has proved particularly important in these extremely unusual and fast-moving circumstances.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for what she has said. Notwithstanding the existence of strongly differing opinions on this legislation, and on the wider issue of Brexit, I hope that all colleagues will share in the appreciation for the skill and dedication of our professional staff. Colin Lee, the Clerk at the Table sitting in front of me, is well known to many throughout the House as a quite outstanding public servant, and the same is true of the whole team who serve us so well and so faithfully and dispassionately day after day. That is respected, and I appreciate the fact that it has been put on the record by the right hon. Lady.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given the unusual speed with which the legislation we have just approved has passed through both Houses, and given the Leader of the House's business statement earlier today, are you able to advise us whether there is confidence that Royal Assent will indeed be granted tonight so that the motion under the Act—I think I am the first person to refer to it as an Act—once Royal Assent has been given, can be considered tomorrow?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that I am cautiously optimistic on that front. Steps are being put in train to ensure that Royal Assent is obtained before the House rises tonight. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to provide that information to the House.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I put it on record that today the Prime Minister has found time to meet the 1922 committee but, I regret to say, we still do not have a date for her to meet the Liaison Committee? I know that you have already pointed out to the House that that is part of the House's ability to hold the Prime Minister to account at this important time. Will you join me in hoping that the Government Front Bench will, again, pass on to the Prime Minister a formal request for her to set a date?

Mr Speaker: I am certainly very happy to join the hon. Lady in the expression of that request. I make no comment on the other gathering in front of which the Prime Minister may have appeared. Certainly, as far as the House is concerned, the point that the Chair of the Liaison Committee makes is of the highest importance.

The role of the Liaison Committee in holding the Executive to account and, in particular, holding the Prime Minister to account can hardly be overstated. The Liaison Committee is a greatly respected body. The custom and practice whereby the Prime Minister regularly appears before it are now very well established. It would seem to me to be highly desirable that an appearance should take place sooner rather than later.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not wish to detain the House, but further to the point of order from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), I want to seek your guidance on the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 5) Bill, which is heading for Royal Assent this evening. I want to seek your guidance on the procedures of this House, given the business statement for tomorrow, should there be unusual circumstances and the Bill not receive Royal Assent this evening.

Mr Speaker: My feeling is that as long as Royal Assent is given by tomorrow morning, the motion should be unaffected. It would, however, be—how can I put it?—altogether tidier if Royal Assent were achieved tonight. The hon. Gentleman is, in a sense, the opposite of Dr Pangloss: he is working on the basis of the worst case scenario that could arise. What I would say is, it is not that bad.

PETITIONS

Local facilities on the Hull Boothferry Estate

11.2 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I rise to present a petition concerning the lack of facilities for residents of the Boothferry estate in the city of Kingston upon Hull. I thank our wonderful candidate, Dawn Sullivan, who arranged the collection of all the petitions in front of me. I hope that the Government will take note of the circumstances in this area and others around the country, arising as they do from successive cuts to local authority budgets since 2010.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the facilities on the Boothferry Estate in Hull are woefully inadequate and need to be improved, notes that there is only a single pharmacy to support a population of 3,028 and further notes that Hull City Council has lost one pound in every three from its budget since this government came to office in 2010.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to release more money to Hull City Council to improve local facilities on the Boothferry Estate.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002445]

Closure of Suggitts Lane Level Crossing, Cleethorpes

11.3 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I am pleased to present a petition from residents of my Cleethorpes constituency, concerning the closure of Suggitts Lane level crossing. This is an issue that I have brought before the House on four previous occasions. The petition,

[*Martin Vickers*]

which contains almost 4,000 names, shows the strength of feeling in the local community against the closure, which will cause great inconvenience. I pay particular tribute to Lynn Sayles and her team, who worked so hard in producing the petition.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of North East Lincolnshire,

Declares that the proposed closure of the level crossing (number 42, O.S. Grid ref. TA300097) at Suggitts Lane Level Cleethorpes by Network Rail is at this time not warranted, and substantial investment and enhancement of safety at the crossing should be explored and enacted before any other option is considered. This is to avoid loss of a vital historic, public amenity and would also result in a significant proportion of the public (who for health and disability reasons are unable to use the footbridge) being denied access to the Sea Front and Local Amenities.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to instruct Network Rail to consult with users of the crossing in order to establish a viable plan to keep the crossing open.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P002446]

UK Fishing Industry: Non-EEA Visas

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

11.5 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): We are considering the matter of visas for non-European economic area citizens working in the UK fishing industry—sadly, not for the first time. In fact, I last brought this matter before the House on 11 July. Others have led Adjournment debates on the same topic on different occasions. It has been raised on multiple occasions at Home Office questions, most recently by me. Sadly, now, here at the beginning of April, we are no further forward.

I will not rehearse the arguments around the necessity for our fishing skippers to be able to employ crew from outside the European Union or the EEA. I suspect that that has been done to death. If we were going to win the argument by raising the issues, we would have won it long ago.

Tonight, I will gently remind the Minister of a couple of things that she told the House in July. I invite her, when she speaks, to give us something of a progress report. I will then consider the content of the Migration Advisory Committee report from September of last year which, according to the Minister when I last raised this with her, is now the basis on which the Government seek to resist the fairly sensible and, I would have thought, uncontroversial measures that we seek to have introduced.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for his fortitude in this issue. The Minister, too, knows the reasons why we are discussing it. Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that highly skilled fishermen from the Philippines, for example, and other countries must have streamlined access to this incredibly dangerous profession? Does he agree that the future of our fishing sector depends on it?

Mr Carmichael: I do agree, and I thank the hon. Gentleman not only for his assiduous attendance at these debates and at other meetings but for his use of the term “highly skilled” fishing crews. Those who go to sea to bring the fish home to put on our plates are highly skilled. The root of the problem is in essence one of attitude, which somehow classes those brave, hard-working men as low skilled. Yes, I agree with him.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the problem seems to be that when skill is defined, it is always still defined in academic terms? Actually, skill is an inherent ability that someone has to do a task, not necessarily academic at all.

Proceedings interrupted.

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 Acts:

Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019.

On resuming—

Mr Carmichael: I am sure we will all sleep better for that—especially knowing that Her Majesty will now be in a position to give her full attention to the matter of visas for fishing crews.

I cannot now remember the point that the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) made, beyond the fact that I certainly agreed with it. [*Interruption.*] It was about academia—indeed. It is worth noting that those who serve on the Migration Advisory Committee and those who have been Ministers are all very learned people. I have long held the view that if we sent some of them out in fishing boats, and if we had more skippers in ministerial offices and in the Migration Advisory Committee, the problem would be solved next Tuesday.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): This is a similar point to the one that the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) just made. It is often argued that the crew members who are much sought after in the Scottish fishing industry and in Northern Ireland are often regarded as low skilled. We can argue about whether they are high skilled or low skilled, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we have a shortage of those very specific skills?

Mr Carmichael: That is absolutely the case. If the crews could be found in the fishing ports that the hon. Gentleman and I represent, we would not be here tonight because there would not be a problem. The fact is that for a whole variety of reasons, which have been rehearsed in the past, the crews are not there. It is difficult for the pelagic fleet and the whitefish fleet, because it pushes them out beyond territorial waters, but it makes the viability of the inshore fleet, which routinely fishes within the 12 mile limit, next to impossible.

I remind the Minister that, in July last year, she said:

“I recognise that the fishing industry will be best placed to take advantage of those future opportunities”—

that is how she earlier described the post-Brexit situation—

“if it has the workforce that it needs.”

It is manifestly still the case today, as I can see from my mailbag and email inbox, that the industry does not have the workforce it needs. The fact that there are so many hon. Members in the Chamber tonight at gone 11 o'clock bears further testimony to that.

The Minister went on to say:

“Two key points will be to the fore when we consider the industry's future labour needs. First, as we leave the European Union, we will take back control of immigration and have an opportunity to reframe the immigration system...In making sure that that happens, we will need the best evidence available, which is why we have commissioned the independent Migration Advisory Committee to report on the economic and social impacts of the UK's departure from the EU and on how the UK's immigration policy should best align with the Government's industrial strategy. The committee will report in the autumn, and the Government will take full account of its recommendations when setting out their proposals for the future immigration system.”—*Official Report*, 11 July 2018; Vol. 644, c. 1082.]

She went on to acknowledge the case that many of us made about the urgency of the matter—it was urgent in July last year.

I now wish to turn the House's attention to the Migration Advisory Committee's report of last September. The section entitled “Productivity, innovation, investment

and training impacts” on page 2 of the executive summary includes an interesting paragraph—paragraph 14—which states:

“The research we commissioned showed that overall there is no evidence that migration has had a negative impact on the training of the UK-born workforce. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that skilled migrants have a positive impact on the quantity of training available to the UK-born workforce.”

That is a very small point, but I mention it because in the debate in July several hon. Members said that there was a real problem with the training available, and that it was because of that that we had had to resort, in the short to medium term, to bringing in non-EEA nationals.

One of the most disappointing parts of the committee's report is that headed “Community impacts”, which is to be found on page 4 of the executive summary. It rates only nine lines, and the related part in the full report runs to some five pages only, most of which comprises graphs. It speaks about some of the issues, which the committee identifies as community impacts, and states:

“The impacts of migration on communities are hard to measure owing to their subjective nature which means there is a risk they are ignored.”

However, it goes on to talk about some things—for example, the impact on crime and on how people view their own communities—but there is not a word in that part about population levels, which is absolutely critical in most island and coastal communities to which the fishing industry is confined. There is nothing to be found about the fact that the inability of boats to go to sea has a massive impact on the shore-side industries, which in turn has a massive impact on the viability of schools, post offices and all sorts of local public services.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Following on from that aspect, the Department's assumption that vessels can simply be crewed by locals is indeed just not true: it cannot be done. We must have a visa system that attracts multi-skilled individuals from beyond these shores and beyond the EEA to ensure we have a fully crewed fishing fleet to do the work required of it.

Mr Carmichael: That is the other reason why I thought I would not bother rehearsing the arguments—I anticipated plenty of people doing so in the Chamber this evening. The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, and I congratulate him on it. It is one I have made in the past, as have other hon. Members. It is as true today as it was in July, and it all contributes to my and my constituents' sense of frustration that now, getting into the middle of April, we are still no further forward.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): When the right hon. Gentleman held a debate last July, England was losing a World cup semi-final. I am pleased to say that the football fortunes are better this time, with Scotland's women beating Brazil 1-0 tonight, so I congratulate him on any link there.

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with me that there is a simple solution? Previously, we had a scheme that allowed non-EEA workers to work within the fishing industry. It was successful, and it did what it was intended to do. There is a simple solution for the Minister, which is to stand up at the Dispatch Box and say we will revert to that scheme.

Mr Carmichael: That has perfect simplicity. I will not get into a conversation, with the hon. Gentleman in particular, on the subject of football—there are very few people in this House who know less about the subject than I do—but he brings welcome news to the House. The point about the previous system is a good one because it also has a bearing on the conclusions of the Migration Advisory Committee about what they describe, I think pejoratively, as “low-skilled workers”.

To quote from the executive summary again—I will look in a bit more detail at the substantive parts of the report in a second—at paragraph 36 on page 5, the committee states:

“We do not recommend an explicit work migration route for low-skilled workers with the possible exception of a seasonal agricultural workers schemes.”

In fact, such a scheme has subsequently, however inadequately, been introduced. It observes, quite drily:

“This is likely to be strongly opposed by the affected sectors.”

It goes on to say at paragraph 37:

“If there is to be a route for low-skilled migrant workers we recommend using an expanded youth mobility scheme rather than employer-led sector-based routes.”

This is quite telling about the work of the Migration Advisory Committee, because it seems to be suggesting, when looking at sector-based routes, that it rejects such a route because those coming to the UK for these, as it calls them, low-skilled jobs, should then be able to move from sector to sector. It is ridiculous: the idea that somebody is going to come from the Philippines to work in a whitefish or pelagic boat out of Lerwick, and then go and take a job in a bar or picking fruit or whatever, just shows how divorced it is from the reality of what it has been charged with considering. But probably the most insulting part of this piece of work is the reference to youth mobility and a cultural exchange scheme for people aged 18 to 30 from a number of listed participating countries.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the fishing industry should be appealing to people on a career basis, but that, in the meantime, the Scottish fishing industry needs non-EEA fishermen, and the Government must recognise that and play their part?

Mr Carmichael: That is absolutely the case. It is going to take a long time to get back to having fishing as a career, because the fishing industry has been talked down by teachers, career advisers and the rest for years now. I understand the reasons for that, but I think they are misplaced. It will be a long time before we change that attitude—and it is attitude that is behind this.

Dr Whitford: Is that not an issue when, particularly up and down the west coast, where inshore fishing is hit, we have skippers who own boats and therefore should be really successful but are not at sea because they cannot get crew?

Mr Carmichael: Indeed. They cannot get crew, so they cannot land fish, which affects jobs in the processing sector. There is a ripple impact, which affects everyone from the shoreside suppliers right the way down the line.

Returning to the youth mobility scheme, the Migration Advisory Committee concludes, at paragraph 7.53 on page 118:

“If the Government does want to provide a safety valve for the employers of low-skilled workers then an expanded Youth Mobility route could potentially provide a good option. The benefits of this option are that younger migrants are more likely to be net fiscal contributors (because the scheme does not allow dependants) and workers have freedom of movement between employers, which is likely to reduce the risk that employers will use migrants’ visa status to hold down their wages.”

So, according to the Migration Advisory Committee, the answer to the crew shortages in our fishing ports is to crew boats using New Zealanders and Australians on a gap year. I just wonder what world these people live in. That is insulting, and it is not just an insult from the Migration Advisory Committee; since the Minister and her colleagues rely on the report as the basis for continuing to refuse the most modest and common-sense proposal, it is an insult from those on the Treasury Bench themselves.

My plea to the Minister is simple. We have made this case times without number. Will she now please start to listen?

11.22 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing the debate, and I am grateful to the other hon. Members who have intervened.

As the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, this is not the first time he has had an Adjournment debate on this topic. The last occasion was indeed on 11 July last year, although I would like to correct my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), who made the point that England were losing their World cup semi-final. If I remember correctly, they were not losing while we were having the debate; it was not until we had adjourned to the Smoking Room that I managed to see England lose. As an English Member responding to contributions from a number of Scottish colleagues that night, I was very conscious that they may have slightly different ambitions for the evening when it came to the football.

At the invitation of the right hon. Gentleman, I would like to bring the House up to date with what has happened in the nine months since we were last gathered for a debate on this important subject. The first thing to mention is that I spent some of last summer on the road. It is always—perhaps particularly at the moment—good to get away from this place. I visited agricultural and fishing communities in both Scotland and Northern Ireland, and I was able to listen at first hand to the concerns of those working in those industries. I found it incredibly valuable to hear what they had to say.

The second point—the right hon. Gentleman referenced this significantly in his speech—is that the Migration Advisory Committee issued its report on the impact of EEA migrants last September, with recommendations on the future system. The MAC took evidence from a wide range of organisations and individuals and visited every region of the United Kingdom, and that included talking to representatives of the fishing sector. I recognise that not everybody agrees with the MAC’s conclusions—probably an impossibility, given the subject matter—but I do not think that anyone can dispute the thoroughness and rigour of its approach.

Mr Carmichael: I very much dispute the rigour and thoroughness. The MAC has taken a broad range of views, in a broad range of sectors. It has given no specific consideration at all to the needs of the fishing industry. Will the Minister, either by going back to the MAC or else by some other route, ensure that we get the proper consideration of the industry's needs that—as surely must be apparent from the parts of the report that I have read out—they have not yet been given?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Gentleman will be conscious that the MAC's commission was quite wide ranging—as I pointed out, it spoke to the representatives of the fishing industry—but he will also be aware that at present it is conducting a review of the shortage occupation list at all levels. Whereas previous reviews have looked at higher skill levels—I will address the definition of skills in a moment—this time round the MAC has been asked to look at all skill levels and so will consider industries such as fishing, which we have been talking about this evening.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) talked about skill levels, and I think it is worth expanding briefly on that point. As the Minister, I am conscious that when we discuss visas and immigration matters we often use the terminology of skilled and highly skilled. That is in no way to denigrate the range of different skills that are necessary across a wide range of industries. I have had a number of meetings, particularly over the last couple of weeks, in which we have talked about the care sector. Nobody would suggest that those working in care were not highly skilled, with a range of perhaps softer skills, which are absolutely necessary when caring for those with disabilities.

However, the MAC was clear when it gave its advice to us in the autumn that there was no case for schemes for particular sectors in the immigration system, other than agriculture, which has some unique characteristics. Instinctively, that has to be the right approach. Governments should avoid picking particular sectors of the economy for special treatment. That would inevitably be a highly subjective process and a major distortion of the operation of the market. It is also noticeable that the text of the recent report by the expert advisory group on migration and population established by the Scottish Government does not mention fishing once. The MAC has concluded that immigration is not the answer to depopulation in local areas—a point that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland referred to—and that there other measures that the Scottish Government could look to.

Mr Carmichael: Is the Minister telling the House, then, in all seriousness and sincerity, that she agrees with the suggestion that, instead of a sector-based scheme, we should be looking at expanding the youth mobility programme?

Caroline Nokes: If the right hon. Gentleman exercises some patience, I am coming to a number of points that I would like to make.

It is crucial that the House reflects on the fact that the White Paper published in December was the start of a year-long engagement across different regions of the United Kingdom and different sectors of industry. To date, there have already been in excess of 45 engagement events or roundtables, and we have taken evidence from

650 different organisations or individuals in the first three months of this year alone. That process will continue over the course of this year, because I am conscious that we are introducing a future immigration system that will have to reflect the realities of a post-Brexit Britain and that will have to be sufficiently flexible and adaptable to address the needs of an economy that undoubtedly will change in future. It is important that we listen to the concerns raised by industry and hon. Members and get it right.

Jim Shannon: I remind the Minister of the evidence from the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation that we left with her when I and other hon. Members went to speak to her. The organisation advertised across the whole of Europe, and of the 140 people who replied only five actually came forward. That is an indication that across Europe we cannot get the people to do the jobs and so, if I can use a fishing term, we have to cast our net wider to get the right people for the job. Those are the facts of the case.

Caroline Nokes: As the hon. Gentleman will have heard me say, we have also asked the MAC to look at a revision of the shortage occupation list. He will know that we have suggested the introduction of a separate shortage occupation list for Northern Ireland, as well as consulting on one for Wales, in addition to the separate list that we already hold for Scotland.

We need to be mindful that tying workers to particular employers or sectors can increase the risk of exploitation. I am sure hon. Members will be aware that recently four United Nations rapporteurs wrote to the Irish Government to point out that their scheme, which has been put in place in Ireland to bring in non-EU workers to work in the fishing industry there, is giving rise to forced labour and exploitation on Irish fishing vessels. There is evidence that laws on minimum wage, maximum hours and safety—the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is laughing as I say this—have been widely flouted.

David Duguid: On the subject of exploitation, I hope my right hon. Friend is looking forward, as I am, to her visiting my constituency in the near future to see the conditions in which a lot of non-EEA workers live and work. I would also like to bring her back to the numbers required in this case. In the horticultural sector, the Home Office has already made an allowance in the form of a pilot scheme for 2,500 people. Without getting into a debate about whether that is enough for that sector, that is twice as many as the number that we are talking about for this sector. The latest estimate I have from the Scottish White Fish Producers Association is that we currently have 800 non-EEA crew members, with 400 from the EU. After Brexit, that will be a total of 1,200, which is less than half the number that will be provided for the horticultural sector. Can such a number of visas be made available to see us through on a non-permanent basis while, at the same time, we develop skills locally?

Caroline Nokes: I have listened to my hon. Friend on this subject on many an occasion. He is a forceful and passionate advocate for the industry. On the seasonal workers scheme in the edible horticultural sector, it is important that we have the opportunity to evaluate the

[Caroline Nokes]

scheme and reflect on it, but I am certainly listening closely to the calls this evening for a similar scheme for fishing.

I am conscious that I only have a few minutes left, but I would like to focus attention on the White Paper, which, as I said, we published back in December. I have already indicated that we will have a year of engagement—we are already three months in. It is important to reflect on the fact that the MAC has already suggested that we reduce the skill level from RQF 6 to RQF 3 for those seeking to come to the UK, post the introduction of the new immigration system. As I said earlier, I am not for one moment suggesting that no skill is required to work in the fishing industry. Indeed, having spoken to people in the sector in both Scotland and Northern Ireland, I am full of admiration for those who work in what are extremely difficult, challenging and sometimes downright dangerous conditions. Having given that important clarification, I would like to repeat that the MAC advised that there should be no specific route for those undertaking jobs below RQF 3. We recognise, however, that after 45 years of free movement, many businesses and employers have come to rely on a steady stream of lower skilled migrant labour. We do not wish to create a cliff edge. Accordingly, the White Paper sets out our intention that as a transitional measure we will create a temporary visa that will allow migrants from low immigration risk countries to come to the UK for up to a year to work in jobs at any skill level.

The White Paper does not represent the Government's last word on this topic; quite the reverse. It is the start of the conversation, not the end, and we are talking to every sector of the economy across every nation of the

United Kingdom and every region of England. As I said earlier, Ministers and officials have held 45 meetings with more than 650 stakeholders, and that work will continue in the coming months. I confirm that it will include representatives of the fishing sector. I also hope that it will give me the opportunity to get out and about and visit the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid).

I have the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), with me this evening, and Members will be aware that the Fisheries Bill is making its progress through the legislative process. With that, I conclude my remarks.

Mr Carmichael: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I sense that the Minister has finished her comments. I want to place on record that she said that I was laughing in relation to safety at sea.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is signalling that he was not.

Mr Carmichael: Indeed. As a one-time member of the national council of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, that is a matter that I take seriously. Such mirth as I was displaying had more to do with the Minister's apparent enthusiasm, rare in Government circles these days, for the reports of UN rapporteurs.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has made his own point in his own way.

11.35 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

House of Commons

Tuesday 9 April 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Fuel Duty: Hauliers

1. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What estimate he has made of the average annual savings to hauliers from freezing the level of fuel duty since 2010. [910295]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Fuel duty has been frozen for nine consecutive years, saving money for all those who regularly use our roads. I can confirm that the average road haulier has saved £23,300 per vehicle on fuel since 2010 compared with the pre-2010 escalator plan. However, the benefits to hauliers and motorists of freezing fuel duty must be balanced against the cost to the Exchequer in the context of our need to fund our public services, so we continue to keep it under review.

Maggie Throup: Hauliers have definitely been a major beneficiary of the duty freeze, but will my right hon. Friend consider helping the industry further by investing in a new motorway junction between junctions 25 and 26 of the M1 to help improve connectivity throughout the east midlands?

Mr Hammond: From 2020, all English road tax will be spent on our roads via a dedicated national roads fund—that will be £28.8 billion between 2020 and 2025, including £25.3 billion for strategic roads. We have spent £120 million on the recently opened smart motorway between junctions 23a and 25 of the M1, which will reduce congestion, but we will, of course, continue to take into account the need for connectivity in planning future roads investment in the east midlands.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Chancellor says this needs to be balanced against the needs of the Exchequer, but what about the needs of the environment? What effects have we seen during the period of the freeze, with the failure to tackle emissions and with the road transport sector in particular failing compared with others?

Mr Hammond: We have an extremely good track record on decarbonising our economy. We have set extremely ambitious targets, and we are ahead of all our significant competitors in delivering them.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The freeze in fuel duty has helped hauliers across Essex, but of course there is another measure that could help our hauliers and businesses even more, which would be to dual the A120. Will my right hon. Friend have a word with the Department for Transport to see how we can use the taxes raised to get this road dualled?

Mr Hammond: Never a Treasury questions goes by without my right hon. Friend raising the dualling of the A120. Of course we have a very large fund available, with £25.3 billion for strategic roads, and I am sure my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport is well aware of the compelling arguments in favour of dualling the A120.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What tax breaks is the Chancellor putting in place so that hauliers are able to continue through the uncertainty on contracts during the transition period as we leave Europe?

Mr Hammond: As I have already mentioned, hauliers have benefited very significantly from the freeze in fuel duty, but the hon. Gentleman asks a wider question. If we were to find ourselves leaving the European Union without a deal—a situation that I sincerely hope will not arise—we have a full range of tools available to us, including all the usual tools of fiscal policy. I have headroom within the fiscal rules of just under £27 billion, as I set out at the spring statement, and the Government will work closely with the Bank of England in those circumstances to ensure that fiscal and monetary policy are used to support the UK economy.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair fuel for UK motorists and UK hauliers, the voice of Kirstene Hair must be heard.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Of course, hauliers and motorists warmly welcome the fuel duty freeze, but they are concerned about the disparity in fuel costs across the country and the impact of the cost of oil—they are not seeing that at the pumps. Will the Chancellor, or a member of his ministerial team, meet me to discuss an independent fuel price regulator and to see whether we can sort out these issues?

Mr Hammond: We have a marketplace in fuel in this country, but I understand my hon. Friend's point. I am sure the Exchequer Secretary would be very happy to meet her to discuss it.

Mr Speaker: When she is not busy vice-chairing the all-party group.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I chair Labour's Back-Bench environment, food and rural affairs committee.

The Chancellor always impresses me. He is thoughtful, and I like him a lot. He is thoughtful on Europe and on the environment, but can I take him back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said? Is it not about time we had a modern taxation system that encourages sustainable transport? We are

killing kids and poisoning pregnant women. We know that air pollution is of the utmost importance. I appeal to the Chancellor's radical instinct: let us have a new form of sustainable taxation.

Mr Hammond: I am bemused by the disappearance of Mr Angry, who I am quite used to dealing with at the Dispatch Box. As I said earlier, we have a good track record on decarbonisation and addressing air quality challenges. We provide substantial support for ultra low emission vehicles, we have a highly differentiated vehicle excise duty and company car tax regime, which encourages the purchase of the cleanest and most efficient vehicles, and we will go on seeking to change behaviour through a carefully constructed tax system.

Manufacturing Output Levels

2. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of trends in the level of manufacturing output. [910296]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): Manufacturing output has grown by 8.3% since the start of 2010, having fallen sharply as a result of the financial crisis. The manufacturing sector has seen productivity increase more than three times faster than the UK economy as a whole over the past 10 years. It accounts for almost half of UK exports, and directly employs 2.6 million people.

Chi Onwurah: According to Make UK, we now have the highest level of manufacturing stockpiling of any country in the G7 ever. The chamber of commerce tells me that, in the north-east, stockpiling is putting huge pressure on warehousing and cash flow. That is a direct consequence of Brexit uncertainty. What additional support will the Minister offer to manufacturers? I asked a similar question of the Brexit Minister last week, and he did not seem to know what I was talking about. Will the Minister acknowledge the link between manufacturing output, stockpiling, cash flow and financial viability?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor and other Treasury Ministers are working with the banks, which tell us that they are making funds available to businesses that need support as their cash flow is under pressure and need working capital in the months ahead. Of course, the best service that any of us in this House can do for manufacturers and businesses across the United Kingdom is to support a negotiated exit from the European Union as soon as possible.

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): Building on the previous question, I am told that manufacturing output in Plymouth is holding up well, but that is partly due to customers purchasing to stockpile because of Brexit uncertainty. That may result in a lack of demand once we get Brexit over the line, if we ever do so. Have the Government given any thought to supporting manufacturing businesses through any short-term downturn that paradoxically might occur once we get Brexit over the line?

Robert Jenrick: The Treasury and other Departments have advanced plans to support the manufacturing sector should that be required in the event of a no-deal

exit. The evidence we see shows that, if we can secure a negotiated exit, there is a great deal of business investment waiting to go back into the economy. This year could turn out to be a strong one for the British economy, if only we can secure the deal.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Treasury acknowledge the wisdom in the letter that the Engineering Employers' Federation, which represents 20,000 companies and 1 million workers, sent to the Prime Minister yesterday? It spoke of the renaissance of manufacturing in the earlier part of the decade, but is now expressing despair and is asking simply for the revocation of article 50.

Robert Jenrick: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to support this country's manufacturing sector, he and his colleagues should support a deal so we can leave the European Union in an orderly fashion. We are taking a number of important steps to support manufacturing, including increasing the annual investment allowance from £200,000 a year to £1 million, making research and development tax credits more generous, and backing schemes such as "Make Smarter", which help the manufacturing sector to embrace automation and digital technology and move forward with confidence.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that, despite the Brexit uncertainty, Britain remains the second best country in the whole world for foreign direct investment?

Robert Jenrick: I can confirm that. The UK remains the European leader for foreign direct investment, venture capital investment and tech investment. Even in manufacturing, which is under a certain degree of strain, the UK remains the ninth largest manufacturing nation in the world.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): "Strain" is not the word. In the real world, production and manufacturing output remained 6.8% and 2.7% lower respectively in the three months to January 2019, compared with pre-downturn GDP in the first quarter of 2008. After nine years of policy failure, should the Chancellor and his team not stop throwing spanners in the manufacturing works and instead oil the machine?

Robert Jenrick: Not at all. Manufacturing exports are up 35% since 2010. We are investing in the manufacturing sector through our industrial strategy. We are creating a tax system that is pro-business. We are reducing corporate taxes to amongst the lowest in the developed world. The hon. Gentleman would do the opposite and reverse that. The very clear message that businesses give us, particularly international investors in this country, is that the threat of a hard left Labour Government dwarfs the risk of a Brexit outcome. We want to secure the future of the British economy in a resolutely pro-enterprise country.

Peter Dowd: What can I say? That old chestnut—and the Leader of the Opposition will be in No. 10 today as well. Anyway, I admire the Chancellor's perseverance in trying to get the Prime Minister to grasp the concept of compromise—a challenging task, I have to say. Perhaps a less onerous task would be to sort out the problem with production. In the three months to January 2019,

it fell by 1% compared with the same period last year, driven by a significant fall of 1.5% in manufacturing, which, of course, includes the beleaguered automotive sector. If the Government were a car, it would fail its MOT. The Chancellor has been putting manufacturing into reverse gear. Isn't it time for a new car with a new driver?

Robert Jenrick: The British economy is remarkably robust in its present state. We are seeing continued economic growth, record levels of employment and record low levels of unemployment. Businesspeople, investors and entrepreneurs the length and breadth of the country know that the greatest threat to our prosperity is a hard left Labour Government.

Renewable Energy: Public Funding

3. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of trends in the level of public funding for renewable energy since 2010. [910297]

13. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of trends in the level of public funding for renewable energy since 2010. [910308]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Government have increased support for low-carbon electricity generation through consumer-funded levies, from £1.3 billion in 2010 to over £7.3 billion today, spending £30.7 billion since 2010. This support has enabled the UK to become a world leader in clean growth, and the private sector has invested more than £92 billion in clean energy since 2010.

Kerry McCarthy: I think that is quite a selective answer. A coalition of 20 community energy projects and affiliated groups has warned that the Government's decision to axe the feed-in tariff incentive scheme could prove the final nail in the coffin for the sector. Since that warning was issued in February, at least 30 planned community energy projects have stalled. So what conversations has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to give proper support to community energy projects?

Robert Jenrick: I thank the hon. Lady for that question, but that is not our experience. The investment that I have just described that is going into the sector is very considerable. Renewable capacity has quadrupled since 2010. Renewables' share of electricity generation increased to 33% last year—a record high. The UK is decarbonising and we are meeting our climate change targets.

Afzal Khan: Members across the House recognise the importance of funding renewable energy policies to tackle climate change and improve air quality, but that does not go far enough. In Manchester, 126,600 children are growing up in an area with an unsafe level of air pollution. As the Mayor of Greater Manchester highlighted, further investment is needed to tackle the scale of the problem and protect the health of the most vulnerable—our

children. Will the Chancellor commit to providing the wider resources needed to protect our children from toxic air?

Robert Jenrick: The Mayor of Greater Manchester has the resources that he requires. The Government are supporting Mayors and urban areas across the country to take action on air quality, and we are providing money from national Government, for example through the £2.6 billion transforming cities fund, of which Greater Manchester has a significant share, to invest in the transport solutions of the future.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Although there is clearly more to do on climate change, surely action taken by this Government since 2010—we have reduced greenhouse gases, we have got more low-carbon jobs, especially in my constituency, and we are investing billions in renewables—must show our commitment.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Last month, in the spring statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was able to add to those policies by announcing a scheme to help small and medium-sized enterprises to reduce their carbon footprint; a new marine zone around Ascension Island; support for the renewables sector; the new future homes standard, to ensure that from 2025 homes are built with low-carbon heating and high levels of energy efficiency; and many other policies.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Tidal energy projects are powering ahead in Scotland and show substantial export potential. The Scottish Government recently announced support funding of up to £10 million to assist in commercialising its use. What support will the UK Government give the industry?

Robert Jenrick: The UK Government are supporting tidal energy. We have looked at any schemes that have become available to us. We have to balance the interests of the ratepayer, the taxpayer, to ensure that the schemes that we do support are the right strategic technology and the right value for money for the UK.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to one of this country's most successful publicly funded renewable energy programmes ever? I am of course talking about the last Labour Government's export tariff, the feed-in tariff scheme, the biggest single democratisation of energy that the UK has ever seen, cutting 700,000 tonnes of carbon. This month, however, in an act of supreme national and international self-harm, the Government killed it off—kaput, finito, game over. In the real world, how can anyone, anywhere believe that this Government take their climate change obligations seriously?

Robert Jenrick: The facts speak for themselves. The UK is on track to over-deliver comfortably on the first three carbon budgets out to 2022. The clean growth strategy sets out how we will meet our fourth and fifth carbon budgets, which take us to 2032, while keeping down costs for consumers, creating good jobs in the clean energy market and growing the economy.

Working-age Benefits

4. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): If he will end the freeze on working-age benefits. [910299]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Thanks to our stewardship of the economy and the fact that wages are now rising above inflation, we are able to move on from the benefits freeze. From April 2020, we expect that increases will resume in line with inflation.

Alison Thewliss: That entirely misses the point. Research by the Resolution Foundation published last week confirms that the value of child benefit is at a record low, 40 years after it was introduced. Meanwhile, the shambolic Tory Government throw good money after bad in their botched Brexit plans. Is it not time for the Chief Secretary to speak to the Chancellor and ask him to get his priorities right and to give families a much-needed pay rise?

Elizabeth Truss: I would have thought that the hon. Lady would welcome the fact that unemployment in Scotland is at a record low level, thanks to our policies of getting more people into work and of making work pay.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Yesterday marked the beginning of the fourth year of the benefits freeze. Since it was brought in in 2016, the consumer prices index has increased by 6.6%, but working-age benefits have been frozen. That literally means that those in the most need can afford fewer necessities. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that by 2020, the benefits freeze will have pushed 400,000 into poverty. How can the Chancellor justify that?

Elizabeth Truss: I would have thought that the hon. Lady would welcome the fact that we are ending the benefits freeze. It is responsible to do so only when people in work's wages are rising. Thanks to our economic reforms, our reforms to employment law and our welfare reforms, we are now able to do that.

Kirsty Blackman: The benefits freeze is a political choice made by this Conservative Government and this Conservative Treasury; it is not a necessity. It is one of the biggest cuts to social security we have seen in recent times. The entire cost of the work allowance concessions over three years amounts to less than the benefits freeze takes away in one year. When FTSE 100 chief executive pay has increased by 11% in the past year, is it not now time that the UK Government got their priorities in order and protected those who need it most rather than giving tax cuts to the richest?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady obviously has not heard my answer that we are now moving to a situation in which benefits will rise in line with inflation, but let us be honest about the choices that the Scottish Government are making. Their choice is to raise taxes on people earning £50,000 by £1,500 a year, driving business out of Scotland and making the Scottish economy less successful.

Low-paid Workers: Take-home Pay

5. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase take-home pay for low-paid workers. [910300]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

The Government are committed to making work pay and ensuring that people keep more of the money they earn in their pockets. Last week, we saw another above-inflation increase in the national living wage, meaning that a full-time worker on the national living wage would be earning £690 more over the coming year. This week, the personal allowance has increased to £12,500. A single person on the national minimum wage, working 35 hours a week, would have taken home £9,200 in 2010; this year, they will take home £13,700.

Alex Chalk: One way of increasing take-home pay is to create more high-paying jobs in the first place. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Cheltenham's Government-backed cyber innovation centre, which sees the country's finest cyber-security minds from GCHQ nurturing small businesses, is an excellent example of how the state and the private sector can combine to boost the economy and generate great jobs to boot?

Mr Hammond: I agree that the public and private sectors can work together to support digital businesses, including in the vital area of cyber, and that is why we have established the Cheltenham innovation centre as part of our £1.9 billion commitment to cyber-security.

18. [910313] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Last month, Nottingham Trent University released a report mapping Nottingham's employment trends. It found that, in the 10 years from 2008 to 2018, earnings in our city rose by just 11.6%, compared with 19.9% nationally. Too many of my constituents are working hard, but are still in poverty and are reliant on benefits just to make ends meet. What specific action is the Chancellor taking to tackle low pay and economic insecurity in order to ensure that people in Nottingham do not just have work but have good work?

Mr Hammond: There are two parts to our approach. The first is a laser-like focus on raising productivity—investing in the infrastructure and skills that we need to raise productivity—because that is the only way to raise wages sustainably. We have also introduced the national living wage, and have increased it way ahead of inflation. We will have to set a new target for the national living wage from next year. I announced in the Budget that I have asked Professor Arindrajit Dube to conduct a survey of the literature on minimum wages and employment opportunities for people on low pay, so that we can address this issue and seek to raise the pay of the lowest paid as fast as we can without destroying their employment opportunities.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Further increases in the national living wage are vital to tackling the low pay culture, but does the Chancellor agree that as the rates increase, so does the risk of non-compliance? Does he therefore think that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is adequately resourced to be able to go after rogue employers who do not pay a fair wage?

Mr Hammond: Yes, my right hon. Friend is right. We have provided HMRC with additional resources, and wherever HMRC get reports, it pursues them. It also proactively looks for employers who are not meeting their legal obligation.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): A recent survey by the Centre for Labour and Social Studies showed that a third of workers struggle with the cost of living and two thirds of workers expect to get poorer this year, yet FTSE 100 CEOs have been seeing their wages rise six times as fast as those of the average worker. To me, that sounds like a laser-like focus on increasing inequality.

Mr Hammond: The Government are responsible for the productivity agenda and the setting of targets for the national living wage. As I have already set out, working in those two tracks is the way to deal with the challenge of low pay. I can tell the hon. Lady what will not help workers on low pay: having their personal allowance taken away from them.

Tax Paid: Reductions

6. **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): What progress he has made on reducing the total amount of tax that people pay. [910301]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): This Government have made very significant progress in reducing the burden of taxation on the low paid, including by recently increasing the personal allowance to £12,500—thus taking 1.7 million of the lowest paid out of tax all together since 2017.¹

Stephen McPartland: What the Treasury gives with one hand, local authorities are taking away with the other, with relentless rises in council tax, and parking charges and fees affecting households up and down the country. What are we actually doing to help families, instead of paying them lip service?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend makes the important point that there are many costs and taxes that bear down on the lowest paid. That is why, in addition to increasing the personal allowance, the Conservatives have introduced the national living wage, which has gone up well above the rate of inflation this April. We have frozen fuel duty for nine years in a row, which has saved the average car driver £1,000 cumulatively. We should also not forget that 28% of all income tax is paid by just the highest 1% of earners.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister can say anything he likes, obviously. In fact, he knows that the tax system is skewed in favour of richer people. The poorest 10% pay 42% of their income in taxes, whereas the richest pay 34%. Does he have any plans to achieve greater parity, particularly in VAT?

Mel Stride: I am surprised that the hon. Lady should mention the level of tax paid by the most wealthy, because under this Government, as I have just stated, the highest-earning 1% pay a full 28% of all income tax. Under the last Labour Government, that figure was substantially lower at around 24%.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Minister agree that taxes could be lower if spending was better controlled, yet this House provides no scrutiny of spending whatsoever? The supply and appropriation Bill that he presented just over a month ago was not debated or

voted on. Is it not time that, like other Parliaments, we had a Budget committee and a parliamentary Budget office to scrutinise spending and hold Government properly to account?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary has just appeared before the Procedure Committee to address just the issue that my hon. Friend raises.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Given that our social care system is breaking, causing indignity, poverty and hardship to millions of people in their old age, might it be time to consider increasing fair taxes, so that we can live in a civilised society that looks after its most vulnerable people?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman may know, £400 million went into social care just at the last Budget. It is the mission of this Government to get taxes as low as possible so that we have a strong economy. Our record is good: we have about the highest level of employment in this country's history, more women are in work than at any time in our history, and we have halved unemployment since the mid-1970s. All of that is about creating the wealth and the money to make sure that we can afford the public services that the public expect.

Living Standards

7. **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of his fiscal policy on living standards. [910302]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Distributional analysis published by the Treasury at Budget 2018 shows that decisions taken by the Government on tax, welfare and spending on public services have benefited households across the income distribution, with the poorest households gaining the most as a percentage of net income.

Drew Hendry: The £1.7 billion announced yesterday for universal credit does not even touch the sides of the £12 billion of welfare cuts since 2015, nor does it contain provision to repay the debts that universal credit has caused for local authorities, such as the £2.5 million cost that has been borne by every highland household six years into the roll-out. Should Highland Council send the invoice for that debt for council tax payers directly to the Minister?

John Glen: No, it should reflect on the range of measures the Government took at Budget 2018, including the new energy price cap, the doubling of free childcare and the steps we have taken to reduce the burden on households by reducing fuel duty.

Pay Levels

8. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of pay since 2010. [910303]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Pay has increased by 20% since 2010, we have a record number of people in work and wages are growing at their fastest pace for 10 years.

1. [Official Report, 11 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 5MC.]

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for that answer. However, the ongoing benefit freeze will result in those on very low incomes being more than £800 worse off by 2020. Meanwhile, tax cuts for the rich mean that those who earn more than £60,000 will be better off. The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights said that UK poverty is a direct result of political choices, so when will the Government address the fact that their political choices have led to one in eight people who are in work living in poverty?

Elizabeth Truss: At the Budget in 2018, we put an extra £630 into the pockets of working families on universal credit. The way we will make sure that our country succeeds is by increasing economic growth, building more houses and cutting the cost of living, not by saying that business is the enemy and trying to crash our economy.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the rather bizarre policy suggestion of removing personal allowances from the low paid?

Elizabeth Truss: I think it is an extremely strange idea. What we need to do is cut taxes for those on low incomes, and that is what we are doing: from this April we will cut taxes by £130 for those on basic rate taxes, meaning that they will be able to keep more of their own money.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): At this stage of the economic cycle there are many more people in employment, but many of them are in low paid or part-time employment. What steps are the Treasury and the Government taking to increase the level at which people earn a living to pay for the necessities of life?

Elizabeth Truss: Let us be clear about the statistics. Over the past year, 90% of the increase in employment has come from full-time workers, and 97% has come from high-skilled jobs. We are building an economy fit for the future.

Stamp Duty Land Tax

9. **Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con):** Whether he plans to reform stamp duty land tax. [910304]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government have made substantial progress in reforming the stamp duty regime. At autumn statement 2014, SDLT was cut for 98% of those people due to pay it.

Greg Hands: Since we last spoke about this, the spring statement showed a further decline in receipts of an additional £2.7 billion over the scorecard. That was not due to changes in Wales and the welcome first-time buyer reforms, which were already in the October Budget numbers. What are the Government going to do to reform the system, protect revenue, grow social mobility, allow the elderly to downsize and get Britain moving again?

Mel Stride: The year-on-year changes to the level of receipts from SDLT have reduced recently, but that is due largely to the fact that we have put a great deal of

relief into first-time buyers' relief, which is already helping 240,000 first-time buyers get on to the housing ladder.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): However the Minister dresses it up on stamp duty land tax and other issues where the wealthy have seen their taxes cut, the impact on our economy is clear. Will he explain why stamp duty land tax reform is a priority rather than addressing the fact that in our country today one third of all families with a child under five are in poverty?

Mel Stride: It is most certainly not our priority to reduce SDLT for the very wealthy. In fact, the current levels—12% plus 3% if it is an additional dwelling—are high. I can also inform the hon. Lady that the amount we raised through stamp duty land tax in 2017-18 was twice the amount raised back in 2010-11.

Loan Charge

10. **Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab):** What representations he has received on the introduction of the 2019 loan charge. [910305]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The loan charge was announced at Budget 2016 and was subject to public consultation. We have received representations, including from campaigners and the wider public. Disguised remuneration schemes pay loans in place of ordinary remuneration, with the sole purpose of avoiding income tax and national insurance.

Christian Matheson: I fully support measures to close loopholes for disguised remuneration, but not when they affect my constituents retrospectively. If the loans were illegal at the time my constituents took them out, why is it now necessary to introduce the loan charge?

Mel Stride: It is important that the House fully understands how disguised remuneration works. If, instead of paying an employee their earnings in the normal way, an employer pays them by way of a loan via an offshore trust in a low or no-tax jurisdiction—with no intention of ever repaying the loan and simply to avoid national insurance or income tax—that is wrong. As for the matter of retrospection, that model has never, ever complied with our tax code. The loans to which I refer are persisting today, not retrospectively. That is why it is right—and only fair on those taxpayers who pay the correct amounts at the right time, and on our vital public services, which rely on that money—that we collect it.

Lending to Small Businesses

11. **Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab):** What further steps his Department is taking to regulate lending to small businesses. [910306]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Loans of less than £25,000 to the smallest businesses are already regulated under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. The Government are committed to regulating only where there is a clear case for doing so, to avoid putting additional costs on lenders and businesses, and the Government welcome the recent expansion of the Financial Ombudsman Service and the establishment of a voluntary dispute resolution service.

Gill Furniss: A succession of small business lending scandals has come to light in recent months, including from Clydesdale, the Global Restructuring Group and HBOS. This has highlighted that small businesses are still struggling to get fair access to finance. Last week, Labour set out our proposals to fix this, including plans to set up a post bank that would offer relationship banking for small businesses to improve their access to finance. Will the Minister support Labour's proposition for a publically owned postal bank that will provide trustworthy finance for small businesses?

John Glen: I am sorry, but I cannot give the hon. Lady that undertaking. I really passionately believe that we need to resist additional Financial Conduct Authority fees, product reviews, increased compliance and monitoring costs for businesses, stifled product innovation and narrower product choice for small and medium-sized enterprises, which would be the consequences if we followed Labour's advice on this policy area.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Question 22 will probably not be reached. If the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) were standing, I would call him, but he is not, so I will not—

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: But he does, so I shall—Mr Robert Courts.

22. [910319] **Robert Courts:** Mr Speaker, thank you very much. The scourge of late payments is a major problem for small businesses, as I know from my many small businesses in Witney, as a member of the Federation of Small Businesses and as the chairman of the all-party group on small and micro business. Is it not about time that we started celebrating those companies that support the small business supply chain by paying on time?

John Glen: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point. That is why the Chancellor announced at the spring statement that we will require company audit committees to review payment practices and report on them in their annual accounts. This is part of a range of measures that the Government will be setting out shortly when we make a full response after the call for evidence.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Government know full well that some deep-rooted corruption is taking place within major banking institutions when it comes to commercial lending. At the moment, there is nowhere near the type of protection needed to help cover our small businesses in such an eventuality. Will the Government take action now—eventually—to give small businesses that support?

John Glen: We have taken direct action so that small businesses can get a direct and quick response by expanding the authority of the Financial Ombudsman Service and having a retrospective review through the dispute resolution mechanism. What businesses up and down the country want is quick action to deal with disputes that are unresolved.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): High street banks are regulated, but the loans they provide to SMEs are not. There is not even a requirement to treat such a customer fairly and reasonably. In the absence of regulation, should there be a clearer warning about the lack of protection if things go wrong?

John Glen: As my hon. Friend knows through his excellent work with the dispute resolution service, there are some avenues for businesses to go down. Many—virtually all—lenders have now signed up to the standards of lending practice, and that, alongside the expansion of the Financial Ombudsman Service's jurisdiction, gives businesses the assurance they need.

Financial Services Sector

12. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the performance of the financial services sector. [910307]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): UK financial services are globally competitive, and this Government are focused on maintaining that competitiveness. Leaving the EU with a deal will ensure that financial services businesses can continue to operate across borders into the EU. Through our global financial partnerships initiative, we will also build a new framework for rest-of-the-world cross-border financial services.

Sir Desmond Swayne: How will we ensure that those businesses do not end up being regulated from overseas?

Mr Hammond: We have always been clear that the UK must maintain control of the regulations governing one of its most important sectors and, crucially, a sector that the UK taxpayer stands behind. Those regulations have to be made in the UK. The agreement we have negotiated with the EU in the political declaration means that each side would make its own choices on regulation through its own legislative processes, and if any of these lead to our respective regulatory regimes no longer being equivalent, either side would have the right to withdraw market access.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The financial services sector is not above the law. If I can take the Chancellor back to the loan charge, what steps is he taking against accounting firms that told my constituents, who are working in the IT sector with a Government Department, that these schemes were perfectly legal? My constituents now find themselves laden with debt from HMRC and paying these things back. What is he doing about those corrupt accountants?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. As well as pursuing tax avoiders themselves, we have to pursue those who promote tax avoidance. My right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary has just told me that there are over 100 promoters of avoidance schemes who are currently under active investigation by HMRC.

Pension Savings

14. **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage people to save for their pensions. [910309]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Automatic enrolment has reversed the decade-long decline in workplace pension saving. Department for Work and Pensions statistics show that since 2012 over 10 million people have been automatically enrolled into a pension. Minimum contributions increased this month to 8%, and everyone who is contributing at the minimum rate should see an increase in their overall remuneration package.

Bim Afolami: I thank the Minister for that response. One of my constituents in Hitchin is a stay-at-home mother, and the maximum she can contribute to her pension is £3,000 per year, whereas if she were working, she could contribute up to £40,000 per year. I am sure the Minister will agree that we want to encourage people to save for their future. How can we increase the threshold so that stay-at-home parents can increase the amount they put into their pensions?

John Glen: The Government do offer generous tax relief on contributions to, and investment growth within, pensions. We also enable tax-free access to a proportion of savings. It is right that the Government control the cost of tax reliefs, and the £3,600 limit is one method of doing that. I can assure my hon. Friend that all aspects of pension policy and the tax system are kept under review in the context of the wider public finances.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): On Thursday last week, one of my oldest manufacturing companies, Dudson, went into administration. The average length of service is over 20 years, and we now have huge concerns about the pension scheme, as we do about everything else to do with the administration—there is no money left even for redundancy. Will the Minister arrange for me to meet the appropriate Ministers to ensure that we get Government support where we most desperately need it?

John Glen: I am delighted to give the hon. Lady that assurance. A ministerial meeting will be convened as quickly as possible.

FinTech

15. **Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the potential economic effect of the introduction of FinTech in the UK. [910310]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): FinTech revolutionises financial services, promoting innovation, stimulating competition and incentivising firms to deliver better outcomes for customers. FinTech firms directly contribute £6.6 billion annually to the UK economy, employing over 60,000 people across 1,600 companies.

Adam Afriyie: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I thank the Government for keeping us in the No. 1 slot for FinTech. I very much welcome the call for evidence on digital payments, but there is a danger that if the wrong type of payments are taken, particularly around the interchange fees, we could undermine the sector. I therefore urge the Minister to remain open-minded to charging a maximum fee per transaction, as opposed to a proportionate fee.

John Glen: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question and for his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on financial technology over the last four years. The regulator is the UK's leading authority for interchange fee regulation, as he knows, and it is conducting a review into the fees that businesses face when accepting card payments. I acknowledge his concern, and we are open to hearing views on this issue, and on digital payments more broadly, as part of our call for evidence.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Minister think of one independent trade expert who thinks FinTech in the UK will do better once Britain has left the European Union?

John Glen: As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is the Government's policy to have an orderly exit from the EU. However, we know that FinTech has proved to be very resilient in all circumstances. We had record investment of £15 billion last year. That is testimony to the creative power of that industry, working in the financial services sector in the City.

Residential Tower Blocks: Fire Safety Work

17. **Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con):** What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on funding for remedial fire safety work on privately owned residential tower blocks. [910312]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): I meet the Housing Secretary regularly to make sure there are sufficient funds in his budget to address the issues.

Robert Neill: There is a particularly pressing need in the case of blocks such as Northpoint in Bromley, where the owner and the developer refuse to take responsibility, and intend to use legal powers to pass on the costs of aluminium composite material remediation to the leaseholders. That is a complete breach of the Government's undertakings. We need a fund specifically to provide funds for this—directly to leaseholders, if necessary. What is the Minister doing to advance that issue?

Elizabeth Truss: I know that my hon. Friend has been in touch with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on this issue. We fully expect building owners in the private sector to take action to ensure appropriate safety measures are in place. We have written to all owners to remind them of their responsibilities. In addition, local authorities have the power to complete works and recover costs from private owners of high rise residential buildings.

Productivity Levels

19. **Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab):** What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of productivity since 2010. [910314]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): Since 2010, UK labour productivity has grown by 3.9%, leaving it 1.9% above its pre-crisis peak. Slow productivity growth since the crisis is not a phenomenon

exclusive to the UK, but is common across the G7. We have created the £37 billion national productivity investment fund to tackle it.

Mr Sharma: The UK's productivity remains weaker than most other advanced economies. Does the Chancellor agree that the Government should lead the way in tackling the productivity crisis, starting with getting rid of the haphazard Transport Secretary?

Robert Jenrick: No. We are taking a range of interventions, including investing £600 billion in our national economic infrastructure. Over the course of this Parliament, investment in transport and other forms of infrastructure will be £460 million a week in real terms higher than under the previous Labour Government.

Sanitary Products: Funding

21. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): Whether he plans to allocate funding for the provision of sanitary products beyond secondary schools and colleges.

[910317]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The Department for Education is implementing this policy with the purpose of increasing attendance in schools. That is the factor it will take under consideration.

Janet Daby: The Chancellor's spring statement announcement of free period products in secondary schools and colleges was welcomed—very much so. However, he has failed to mention pupil referral units and other alternative education provision, as well as the fact that some children start their periods in primary schools. He has also failed to consider women and girls in vulnerable situations such as homelessness shelters, refugees and women refugees. Will he take a human rights approach to period poverty to ensure universal free access to sanitary products for all women, so we can put a real end to period poverty?

Elizabeth Truss: I know that the children's Minister has already said he will look specifically at primary schools and my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is going to consult widely on the issue.

Topical Questions

T1. [910320] **Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of this country. I will do that through: supporting our vital public services, such as the NHS; investing in Britain's future; keeping taxes low; and continuing to reduce the nation's debt. Securing an orderly departure from the EU will allow our mutual trade to flourish and encourage businesses to invest more in Britain's productive capacity.

Emma Hardy: Shoplifting crime is increasing, antisocial behaviour crime is increasing, violent crime is increasing. The Prime Minister said that austerity is over, so when

can we expect to see the Treasury give the Home Office the funding needed to replace the 20,000 police officers lost since 2010?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): In the Budget settlement at the end of the last year we made sure that there was extra money going into the police, increasing funding and increasing spending power in real terms. We have also allocated extra funding to deal with the scourge of knife crime.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): The Government claim that spending on education is higher than it has ever been. Does that take into account the extra costs the Government have put on schools?

Elizabeth Truss: We have provided schools with additional funding to cope with the rise in pension contributions. We will be looking at school funding as part of the spending review and I will take my right hon. Friend's representations into account.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): With the Brexit dialogue ongoing it is best to leave exchanges on that topic to the negotiations, although I hope we can all count on the Chancellor, if not everyone on his own side, to continue to insist that no deal is not an option.

Turning to Google, when will the Chancellor tackle the scandal of Google's tax avoidance? Google has an estimated taxable profit of £8.3 billion in the UK, so it should have a tax bill, according to the Tax Justice Network, of £1.5 billion. That would pay for 60,000 nurses, 50,000 teachers, seven new hospitals, 75 new schools. It pays £67 million. Why is the Chancellor, year on year, letting Google the tax avoider off the hook?

Mr Philip Hammond: As the right hon. Gentleman probably knows very well, the issue is a good deal more complex than he suggested in his question. We have announced the introduction of a digital services tax to begin to address the challenge of shaping our tax system to respond to the digital age, but the problem is that we have a set of international tax rules that we are obliged to follow, which were invented in the age when international trade was all about goods. Nowadays it is mostly about services, and much of it is about digital services. The international tax system is simply not fit for purpose and the UK is leading the charge in international forums—including the G20, which will be meeting later this week in Washington—in looking for a new way to allocate profits appropriately between jurisdictions where digital platform businesses are involved.

John McDonnell: After nine years in government, that smacks of an excuse, and let me say to the Chancellor that the Government's digital services tax has been roundly criticised as being too narrow and having artificial carve-outs. Let me move on from one scandal to another: the scandal of London Capital & Finance. LCF collapsed in January, leaving 11,000 investors in the lurch. They had £286 million invested in the company and most of them were not wealthy people. The Financial Conduct Authority was repeatedly warned of LCF's dubious structure and operations and failed to respond to those warnings. A decade on from the financial crash and

our regulatory system is still not fit for purpose. What action is the Chancellor taking to secure justice for the LCF investors and to reform our regulatory system?

Mr Hammond: We take very seriously the failure of London Capital & Finance. Last week, my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary directed the FCA to launch an investigation into the company. We will carry that investigation out and look carefully at the findings.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): In Question 2 the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) told us how warehousing across the country was full to bursting point as businesses prepared for a no-deal Brexit. In a leaked letter last week, the Cabinet Secretary implied that business was not ready for a no-deal Brexit. Which is correct?

Mr Hammond: We know that manufacturing companies have been building precautionary buffer stocks of imported components to give them resilience against any disruption at our ports in the event of a no-deal Brexit—this tends to be larger companies. However, it is also the case, as my hon. Friend knows very well from his work as a Minister, that despite the Government's attempts to engage with business, there are still far too many businesses who have adopted the famous approach of the ostrich in the sand in relation to this eventuality and are not taking precautionary actions to prepare for the possibility of a no-deal exit.

T2. [910321] **Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab):** In keeping with the non-angry Yorkshire approach, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), if, indeed, this Chancellor is thoughtful, he will know that, according to research by the Centre For Towns, Yorkshire's growing digital sector is being stifled by patchy broadband connectivity across the region, which is costing us money and jobs. Roles continue to flow down south and into London. With the roll-out of the next generation of 5G internet technology, will the Chancellor, in his thoughtfulness, commit to making funding available for the accelerated adoption of this in the Yorkshire region?

Mr Hammond: Rolling out full fibre is essential to Britain's digital future. That will be done largely by the private sector. The public sector's role will be to provide the appropriate support in areas where full fibre roll-out is not commercially viable, but supporting the urban centres in all our conurbations, including in Yorkshire, will be an early priority for the broadband roll-out programme. I should say to the hon. Gentleman—I hope this will cheer him up—that I recently met an Italian digital entrepreneur who has relocated his business from silicon valley to Sheffield and he said it was the best decision that he ever made.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given that the people have already decided, presumably the Chancellor does not want a second referendum.

Mr Hammond: Contrary to some reports, I have never advocated a second referendum. I simply observed that it is a coherent proposition along with many others that have been discussed in this House.

T3. [910322] **Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab):** My borough of Enfield has seven times more households living in temporary accommodation than the national average, with 18% of people in Enfield classed as being low paid. I have no doubt that the two figures are related so how can the Chancellor defend the Government's record on in-work poverty, insecure work and zero-hours contracts, which have caused so much hardship for so many?

Elizabeth Truss: I think the hon. Gentleman should speak to his friend the Mayor of London about what he is doing to increase house building in London.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What plans are the Government making for a UK investment bank to take over the role of the European Investment Bank in the UK economy?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): In the spring statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor launched a review of our infrastructure financing, which includes that question on whether the UK would benefit from institutional arrangements. We have also made significant funds available to ensure that there is no shortfall for businesses that rely on the EIB.

T4. [910323] **Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab):** Last month's Office for National Statistics figures show that life expectancy for the poorest has fallen whereas for the rich, it has increased. Analysis into the key drivers of that, including Public Health England's investigations, shows that it is the result of cumulative tax and social security changes. I therefore ask the Chancellor, once again, what will he do about that, and particularly, will he stop immediately the benefit freeze that has such a devastating effect on people's lives?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, we are moving on from the benefits freeze. We are in a position now where real wages are growing and benefits will increase in line with inflation from 2020. However, the best route out of poverty and to helping people is ensuring that children get a good education and that more jobs are available in our economy.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Chancellor agree that, in view of the failure of London Capital & Finance, of Premier FX, of individual police forces around the country to investigate economic crime, and of the Serious Fraud Office in yet another case, it is time we had a single economic crime police force in this country to deal with things properly?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): We have a single economic crime board, which was set up in January and chaired by the Chancellor and the Home Secretary, to look at how better collaboration can tackle those challenges more effectively.

T5. [910324] **Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind):** We all know that savings had to be made, but funding for schools, road repairs, social services, nurseries and youth clubs in Dudley has almost been halved because Dudley Council has been hit harder than councils elsewhere in the country. Will Ministers meet me and people from Dudley to discuss our case for fairer funding?

Elizabeth Truss: I was very pleased to visit the hon. Gentleman at Dudley College and see the fantastic work that it does. He put forward some interesting ideas about local transport. We are conducting a zero-based capital review as part of the spending review and of course we will look at proposals on all those fronts.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the Chancellor agree that the announcement that small shops will save up to £8,000 in business rates is a fantastic boost for our high streets? Will he please commit to supporting the bid from Redditch for the future high streets fund?

Mr Philip Hammond: Of course, the rates relief that we have offered over a two-year period to smaller independent retailers will help the high street, but retailers have to use that breathing space to adapt to the changing environment that they face. We cannot freeze the high street in aspic and we must face the reality of the digitisation of our economy. So let us work together to transform our high streets so that they are sustainable for the future.

T6. [910325] **Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab):** The Chief Secretary said in response to the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), who is no longer in his place, that schools would be funded for the additional costs of the teacher pension scheme, yet the Minister for School Standards wrote to me yesterday saying that he was still in the process of reviewing evidence. Schools have not been informed. They have not been given those costs within their budgets and they are having to decide whether to make redundancies because they do not have the information. Please will the Chief Secretary provide clarification?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, we have committed ourselves to ensuring that schools will be funded for that purpose.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the Chancellor explain why the customs union is the wrong policy choice for the future strength of the UK economy?

Mr Philip Hammond: The Prime Minister negotiated a deal with the European Union which gave us many of the benefits of being in a customs union, while preserving our ability to conduct an independent trade policy. We put that deal to the House effectively three times and it was defeated three times, so we have to pursue other options.

T7. [910326] **Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab):** Cuts in alcohol duty have cost the Treasury £4 billion over the last five years. What assessment has the Chancellor made of the impact of those cuts on public health and alcohol-related deaths?

Elizabeth Truss: I observe that the minimum alcohol price in Scotland has resulted in an increase in the consumption of alcohol.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Chief Secretary has said yet again that the Government think building owners should pick up the cost of aluminium composite material cladding remediation. Does she understand that there is no legal means of enforcing

that obligation? In the absence of such a means, will she please revisit the issue of direct funding for the leaseholders as a matter of urgency?

Elizabeth Truss: I note that a growing list of companies, such as Barratt Developments, Mace Group Ltd and Legal & General, are doing the right thing and taking responsibility for paying for remediation. The Government urge all other owners and developers to follow the leads of those companies.

T8. [910327] **David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP):** Housing associations in Parkhead, Tollcross and Shettleston have high levels of tenement stock, and the cost of maintaining it is prohibitive. Will the Chancellor agree to meet me to discuss the case for a modest reduction in VAT to preserve tenement housing, which is a key part of our architectural heritage in Glasgow?

Mr Philip Hammond: That is not an issue with which I am familiar, but I should be happy to hear more about it from the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he would like to write to me in the first instance, setting out the details of his argument.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Chelmsford we love our high street. Does my right hon. Friend agree that giving nine out of 10 of our shops a business rates reduction of up to £8,000 a year will help to create a more level playing field between online and bricks-and-mortar shops?

Mr Hammond: Yes. As I said earlier, it is essential for the high street to evolve to respond to the digital age, but there is no doubt that smaller shops need a breathing space in which to do so, and reducing their business rates this year and next will help them in that regard.

T9. [910328] **Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab):** May I appeal to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to show some humanity to loan charge victims? They have been coming to me in tears, and we know that, nationally, some have committed suicide. Children are suffering because of tax arrangements made years ago. Will the Government please pause these punitive retrospective charges, and go after the providers with the same vigour with which they are going after the little people?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): It is indeed incumbent on HMRC to take its duty of care towards customers—particularly vulnerable customers—very seriously, and I am confident that it does just that. There is a dedicated helpline for those who have been affected by the loan charge, and a vulnerable customers team provides one-to-one support. We recently announced that we would extend the needs enhanced support service to those who are subject to open investigations of their tax returns.

The hon. Lady mentioned promoters. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has already mentioned that more than 100 investigations of companies that promote tax avoidance are currently taking place. Other litigations in respect of offences relating to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes have resulted in wins for HMRC. In the Hyrax case, which was concluded recently, it was

found that the promoter was not behaving appropriately, and about £40 million worth of tax is likely to be recouped as a consequence.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will we continue to invest in the northern powerhouse, and, in particular, will we fully fund the Transport for the North plan for a TransPennine rail upgrade?

Mr Philip Hammond: As I said in my recent spring statement, the Government remain committed to the northern powerhouse and to Northern Powerhouse Rail, and I am working on the TransPennine rail upgrade with my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary.

T10. [910329] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I welcome what the Chancellor said to my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) a few minutes ago about investigations into the promoters of some of the disguised remuneration schemes, but that will not do many of the victims much good. A business in Chesterfield is facing bankruptcy because of the charge. How might his review actually help the people who have wrongly taken advantage of this advice?

Mel Stride: It is largely companies that fall due to the loan charge, rather than individuals—of the 6,000 cases currently being settled, 85% by value relate to companies. HMRC has always been clear that appropriate payment arrangements will be in place to ensure that those outstanding amounts of tax, which after all have been avoided, aggressively and in a contrived way, can be settled sensibly.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What priority will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury give to reducing the tax burden in the coming spending review?

Elizabeth Truss: I hope to follow in the footsteps of former Chief Secretaries who have been keen to keep a tight rein on public spending and ensure that people can keep more of their own money, because ultimately every penny of public spending is money that people have earned and that they could be spending on other things.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Some 55% of Scots pay lower income tax than they would pay if they lived in England. Does the Chancellor not agree that he should take inspiration from the SNP's progressive Finance Minister by protecting public services and the poorest, rather than the better-off?

Elizabeth Truss: The reality is that the SNP Government are putting people off relocating to Scotland and earning higher incomes in Scotland, because those earning £50,000 have to pay an additional £1,500 in tax every year.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What is the Chancellor going to do to help the WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—who have been denied their pensions? It has been going on for far too long and it is about time he did something about it.

Elizabeth Truss: We have had to take difficult decisions because of the state of the public finances that we were left with. We have already made improvements in relation to those women being able to retire, but it is right that we do not burden future generations as a result of our existing commitments.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but we must move on.

Rwandan Genocide: Alleged Perpetrators

12.42 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if he will make a statement on the handling of the cases of the five alleged perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide in the United Kingdom.

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): None of us can forget the horrendous scenes of the Rwandan genocide 25 years ago. My colleague the Minister for Africa visited Rwanda only this week to share in the international recognition and remembrance of those horrific events.

I can confirm that the Metropolitan police's war crimes unit, within the counter-terrorism command, received a referral from the Rwandan authorities in January 2018 relating to five individuals in the UK and allegations of genocide offences in Rwanda dating back from around 1994. Relevant documentation was assessed by the war crimes unit and officers were deployed to Rwanda as part of our initial work to scope out the allegations. We subsequently commenced an investigation, which will initially involve a review of all the documentation transferred from Rwanda. Given the complexities involved, it is expected to be a protracted and lengthy process. Inquiries continue.

Mr Mitchell: As the Minister said, Sunday was the 25th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and I represented this House, along with the Minister for Africa, at ceremonies in Kigali, which were dignified and profoundly moving.

The House will recall that nearly a million Rwandans were murdered in frenzied killing over a 90-day period while the international community effectively did nothing to stop it. Once the killing was ended, those leaders who were responsible for the genocide fled. Over the intervening years, many have returned voluntarily to Rwanda to be processed through the Gacaca court system. Others have been extradited to Rwanda from the United States, Canada, France, Norway, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden. Britain, sadly, is a glaring exception.

Proceedings started here in the UK more than a decade ago in respect of five alleged genocide perpetrators, but in spite of ruling that there was a prima facie case of genocide made out against all five, the British courts declined to extradite. The British taxpayer has already forked out more than £3 million in legal costs, and four of the five are living on benefits, including housing benefit. The Rwandan authorities, having failed to secure extradition in Britain in the lower courts, have declined to proceed to the Supreme Court and have asked that the UK undertake the trial here. In spite of all the evidence already being available here in the United Kingdom, the Metropolitan police have indicated that it could take a further 10 years to process these cases.

The souls of those who were murdered in the genocide cry out for justice, but from Britain justice has at least been delayed and at worst denied. The Nuremberg trials commenced a mere seven months after the end of the war and were concluded within 10 months. In the

interests of those facing these dreadful allegations, as well as of the reputation of British justice, we should surely expect these five alleged génocidaires to be on trial at the Old Bailey by the end of this year. I end with the words spoken last weekend by the distinguished Rwandan Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Mr Johnston Busingye, who, when he came here to Britain, our Director of Public Prosecutions could not even find the time to see. He said this:

"Anyone who cares about British values and justice should be ashamed. The UK will go down in history as the only country in Europe that knowingly shielded alleged Rwandan génocidaires from justice."

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend is a strong supporter of Rwanda and knows the country incredibly well. I respect many of his views on the country and on the need for action, but I have to say that I fundamentally disagree with his last point. The United Kingdom has not shielded these people. He will know that on 28 July 2017 the High Court ruled that they could not be extradited, for fear of not facing a fair trial. He will know and respect the difference between the Government, the police and the judiciary. He will know that we have to follow the rule of law and that ruling.

This Government, and previous Governments, have been committed to bringing people to trial, which is why he has raised this issue. We have spent £3 million trying to get the right outcome, but when the Court ruled that these individuals could not be extradited, the United Kingdom, under its genocide convention obligations and after requests from the Rwandan Government, took on the investigation itself. We went out to meet officials in Rwanda and to gather evidence there, and there is a live police investigation into a number of individuals in relation to potential war crimes. My right hon. Friend will also understand that, as this is a live police investigation, there is no more I can say on this matter, for fear of prejudicing a fair trial here or anywhere else, and that is where we have to leave it. Those are the facts we find before us.

The Government are not shielding any war criminals, and nor should we. We would not do that. We are doing our best. I have raised the issue with the counter-terrorism police, and they say that the timescale for these investigations is not 10 years but more like between three and five years. I can assure my right hon. Friend that if the police require more resource or if they come up against an obstacle relating to international relations, the Government are standing by to help, to expedite and to ensure that those suspected of war crimes face full justice, but there is absolutely no case that this Government or any previous Government have shielded them from any war crimes trials that they might face.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for applying for this urgent question on such an important matter, and I am grateful to you for granting it, Mr Speaker. The Rwandan genocide took place in 1994, and its recent 25-year anniversary was a haunting reminder of what happened. It was an atrocious act of violence, with hundreds of thousands of people being killed in just 100 days. That such a heinous act took place while the world stood by is a stain on the international community.

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

Allegations have been made against five individuals whose extradition to Rwanda was not granted by the High Court in 2017. I will not comment specifically on the individuals themselves. It has, however, been reported in the past couple of days that Scotland Yard received a referral from the Rwandan authorities in January 2018, and that Scotland Yard officers were sent to help with the investigation regarding those individuals, as the Minister has confirmed today.

It is right that these allegations are investigated in this country. We believe in a rules-based international order. If that is to mean anything, a crime against humanity must be considered as a crime against us all; no matter where in the world it takes place, all efforts must be made to pursue justice for victims. Although the Minister must be circumspect about what he says with an investigation ongoing, can he reassure the House that all necessary resources will be put at the disposal of the investigation, that all possible efforts to gather evidence will be made and that, although it will of course be complex, the investigation will be carried out carefully and as speedily as possible?

Mr Wallace: I can give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance. At the beginning of this year, I got an update from the counter-terrorism police about the conduct of any investigations relating to people from Rwanda. In fact, I briefed my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on that at about the same time to make sure he realised we are not forgetting this. We are not going to forget the genocide, and nor are we going to forget bringing those people to justice. I am very happy to keep the House posted, as we are allowed to. Nevertheless, with respect, we have to remember that this is a live police investigation and therefore all the safeguards apply.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Other countries with very strong records of protecting asylum and the rights of individuals under criminal investigation, such as Canada, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, have seen fit to extradite suspects back to Rwanda. Why have we not?

Mr Wallace: If my right hon. Friend has a problem with the judiciary, I suggest he takes that up with the Lord Chief Justice. We have to respect the ruling of the High Court, which took the view in July 2017 that these people would not face a fair trial if extradited. We fought the case, we took it to the Court, the Court decided otherwise, and we have to respect that ruling.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing this urgent question, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it, as the 100 days of commemoration of the 25th anniversary begin. I was part of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation to Rwanda last year—I think it was the first ever CPA delegation to Rwanda—and saw at first hand the efforts that are being made to achieve justice and build peace. However, the question of alleged perpetrators remaining overseas leaves a cloud hanging over those efforts. It is not fair either to those who are accused or to the victims that these accusations are left untested.

Building on some of the questions that have already been asked, and accepting the role of the judiciary, what discussions have been had with other countries about why they felt able to allow extraditions? If the justice system here has concluded that a fair trial cannot be conducted in Rwanda, a way has to be found to achieve justice here. Is the Minister confident that the Met police has enough resources to complete its inquiries? What is the planned timescale for the next steps once those inquiries are concluded? Can he assure us that those steps will be taken as quickly as possible so that justice is both done and seen to be done?

Mr Wallace: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I meet the head of counter-terrorism policing at least once a week, and we discuss a wide range of issues. If there is an issue with resource pressure in this particular case, or in other cases, we will no doubt discuss it and do what we can to solve it. Other courts and other countries have different statute books and different legislative arrangements. We go by our courts, and our courts made that ruling. That is regrettable. I am frustrated, and not just in this case; any Home Office Minister will often see their decisions and their attempts to extradite sometimes very dangerous people struck down. However, that is the rule of law—that is the rules-based system we are in—and, whether I like it or not, it is quite right that we follow it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): With chain gangs labouring in uniforms of magnificent pink, like that worn by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), is there not much we can learn from the Gacaca court system?

Mr Wallace: Well, I am not going to comment on that, but it is very clear that successive Governments have tried to extradite these people to face justice in Rwanda. The courts took a different view. We then stepped up to the plate, and the police, in an operational decision, had to investigate. I am not a learned gentleman with the ability to compare different legal systems, and nor will I attempt to.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I will not ask the Minister to comment on these particular cases, but given the decision of the High Court in 2017, can he assure the House that there is no obstacle in principle to anyone who is accused of war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity facing justice in this country, provided the evidential test is met?

Mr Wallace: I can give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. When it comes to war crimes, under our obligations in the convention there is no barrier at all.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Twelve years ago, I sat in on one of those Gacaca courts and saw some of these genocide suspects being put on trial. It was a rough and ready process, but does the Minister agree that a huge amount of work has been done over the years by the international community, including by British lawyers and experts, to help Rwanda improve its justice system? It has abolished the death penalty. Does he agree that there is no problem in principle with extraditing suspects to Rwanda to face trial?

Mr Wallace: It is our view—it was the Government’s view—and that is why we contested the case. Unfortunately, it was not the view of the UK courts.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): May I plead with the Minister for a greater sense of urgency in this case? The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), whom I congratulate on securing the urgent question, talked about a 10-year delay. The Minister said there was a three to five-year delay. Three to five years is still too long. It is 25 years since the genocide in Rwanda. May we please have a sense of urgency from the Government?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman will have heard me say that it was not until 2017 that we started the investigation here at the request of the Rwandans, so it is not that we have not been doing it for 20-odd years. If there is a requirement for resources, that will be discussed every week with the counter-terrorism police, and I stand by ready to help with that. However, the hon. Gentleman will also want us to ensure that if these people come before a court, they are convicted and that we present the best case possible to ensure that the charges they face are upheld and stick.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I have spent time in Rwanda with Project Umubano and with the Select Committee on International Development. I have met people whose families were slaughtered. I have met people who have reconciled themselves to the fact that they no longer have families. They have gone a long way. I agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) that it has been too long. These people have waited 25 years. Perhaps we have not been doing this for 25 years, but we should have been. We should have moved it on. People cannot come to peace until this is reconciled.

Mr Wallace: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I understand that not only victims but supporters of the country want this matter to be closed and justice to be administered to the people responsible for the genocide. However, a police investigation is a matter for the police. How they conduct it is a matter for them, and how it is prosecuted is a matter for the CPS. We stand by ready to support them in doing that, but, at the end of the day, the police are operationally independent and the CPS is independent on many of these issues.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on asking it. As he mentioned, it was very important for us to attend the Kwibuka 25 remembrance ceremonies in Kigali on Sunday. I must tell the House that the bravery of survivors was humbling. Our duty to them is to pursue justice.

I know the Minister knows that, so may I ask him a broader question? What conclusions has he drawn about the UK’s current ability to act on crimes against humanity, and what discussions has he had with the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development about that? That matters not just to Rwandans but to other victims of grave injustices, such as those from Syria, and not just to direct victims of these heinous crimes but to every one of us in this world, all of whom rely on the rule of law.

Mr Wallace: While I recognise the understandable impatience of many colleagues on these particular cases, we should not lose sight of the fact that the United Kingdom, under successive Governments, has been a proud supporter of administering justice for war crimes around the world—in Bosnia, the former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda and other places. We should be proud of that.

We have not only often put our money where our mouth is, but we have used all diplomatic tools—the former Yugoslavia is a good example—to bring to trial people who thought they were always out of reach of justice. We continue with that enthusiasm and support. If it is a case of resources, the Department and I are standing by to continue the support. We are determined to see justice, and there is no resistance on this side of the House to doing so. We will continue to pursue the case to make sure that these people face the justice they deserve.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Having been on several trips to Rwanda with my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), I entirely share their comments. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that this case is prosecuted with the utmost vigour? If the 2017 High Court judgment leads people to think that the UK is a soft touch, people who commit these atrocious crimes will see the UK as a natural refuge. That should not be the case, and they should know they will face the full force of the law, whatever the views of the court system in the country from which they have come.

Mr Wallace: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to send a strong message. I do not like, any more than he does, seeing in the newspapers that people are living freely in this country having had their extradition effectively turned down, which is why I would like to see, in general—I will not comment on this case—people in this country who have potentially perpetrated a war crime to be persecuted and prosecuted themselves.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Minister is hearing from both sides of the House that we want action and that we want this investigation to happen promptly. We all know that he is not in charge of the courts and that the police are independent, but he does have the power to give extra money to the Met war crimes unit now, rather than waiting for a request. Will he not do that and send a signal from this House that we want the police to have the resources to get this investigation done soon?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman knows full well that if the police require more money, for this or any other issue, they can come to the Home Office—either they internally prioritise or they come to us to see what we can do. We stand ready to do that. I know from my discussions with the police on this issue that this is not about resource; it is about the complexity of the case itself. Some of these cases are incredibly complex, and the challenge of untangling them is one of the reasons it takes time.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), I have talked to some

[*Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*]

of the families who witnessed some of these dreadful crimes. In the Minister's meetings with the Metropolitan police, he should urge it to proceed on this as urgently as possible. Three to five years is too long. If it were a terrorist outrage in this country, the public would be rightly outraged that it is taking so long. May I urge him to urge the Metropolitan police to get on with this? After all, most of the evidence has already been collected by the earlier court cases.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend may like to reflect that some of the terrorist trials we are awaiting here in the United Kingdom have taken years. They take a long time. In cases that stretch across countries, it is often highly complex to get evidence that reaches the evidential bar in order that a case can be submitted to a court.

Under our system, as under the Rwandan system, the accused has a right of disclosure and defence, and we have to make sure we get that right. I hear the urgency of my hon. Friend and other hon. Members. I will continue to press this when I meet the head of counter-terrorism policing on Thursday. I will make sure the police are aware of the urgency, and we will have a further discussion about whether more resource is needed or whether it is the complexity that is taking time.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I, too, met survivors of the Rwandan genocide when I visited Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2006. I know this subject is very close to your heart, Mr Speaker. I thank you for granting the urgent question, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on asking it.

Mr Speaker, you will remember 10 years ago, when we were joint vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on genocide prevention, sitting in a meeting with Jack Straw on closing the impunity gap in the law and making sure that alleged war criminals could be prosecuted in this country. People will look at us today and say that our judicial system and our asylum system are supposed to give sanctuary to those fleeing human rights oppressors and atrocities, and that they should not be abused by the alleged perpetrators of war crimes. There is no time limit on justice, so why did the police not investigate these crimes in parallel with the extradition process? Will the Minister report to this House on a six-monthly basis so that we are not here still demanding justice for the survivors on the 30th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide?

Mr Wallace: On the hon. Lady's last question, of course I can update the House on the progress of war crimes investigations in general, and maybe specifically around Rwanda, but not on individual cases—I cannot come to the House on those cases, one by one. I spoke earlier about commenting on live police investigations.

It is obviously a matter for the police when they start an investigation, but it is clear from the chronology of this case that the Rwandan Government requested an extradition and we complied with that request. We were keen to see these people extradited to face justice in Rwanda. We had safeguards, and we were confident that Rwanda would be able to deliver a fair trial. Regrettably, that was not the view taken by the High Court in 2017.

Almost as soon as that decision was made, we took up the baton and started the investigation here. We will continue with that investigation, and hopefully we will get to a resolution sooner rather than later.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): When I visited Rwanda in 2002 I had the misfortune to see some horrific scenes as a result of the genocide, and it was made very clear to me then that justice has to be part of the reconciliation process. A lot of progress has been made in Rwanda—I visited again last year and saw some of that progress—but will the Government continue to work with Rwanda to ensure it can continue making progress while, at the same time, recognising that justice is an important part of that recovery process?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Africa Minister visited Rwanda not only to remember the horrors of the genocide and to say, "You are not forgotten," but to continue to commit Britain's support for that country and the amazing progress it has made since 1994.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on raising this issue. Were we talking about people who were allegedly involved in the Nazi holocaust, there would be a much stronger sense of urgency on the action that needs to be taken. In that context, I believe the Minister is defending the indefensible. During the extradition proceedings, there have been 10 years in which I assume information has been gathered by the authorities. To say that it will take a further three to five years, or probably closer to 10 years, to bring the matter to trial is just unbelievable. Complexity and thoroughness do not justify this level of delay, and I urge him to listen to the unanimous voices on both sides of the House and do all in his power—it is not about resources but about a will to act—to ensure that the police pursue this and that these people are brought to justice much more swiftly.

Mr Wallace: I hope the right hon. Lady does not think that because I have upheld the rule of law about the courts, there is no urgency. I would like to see those people off our streets. I do not want war criminals walking around this country. I do not want them here on a day-to-day basis. My strong view is that they should face justice, but police investigations are complex, and there is no magic wand that we can wave to force these things to happen at a quicker pace. We can allocate resource, offer to remove any barriers, whether international or not, and go to court—as we did—on behalf of the victims and the people of Rwanda to try to get this dealt with, but I can do no more than ensure the police know of the urgency. I can continue to monitor the situation and press them, weekly if necessary, to ensure we get a resolution. There is a determination on all sides of the House to bring war criminals to justice, and we will continue to press that.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I accept the Minister's good faith, and I recognise this country's good record on dealing with its international obligations. I welcome the fact that neither he nor anyone else in this House is seeking to go behind the decisions of this country's independent judiciary, but does he recognise that it is important in such cases to ensure that too

much time does not pass and that the testimony of witnesses does not fade? We are often dependent on eyewitness testimony in such cases, and those of us who appear in the courts know that the longer it is since the incident, the harder it is to ensure a fair trial and fair testing of the evidence.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend knows better than anybody else about the judiciary and its relationship with the Executive. I absolutely understand the importance of urgency when it comes to evidence. It is important that we produce trials that are successful. All I can say is what I have said to many hon. Members: I will impress the need for urgency on the counter-terrorism police when I next see them. I promise to update the House on the progress of war crimes prosecutions. My hon. Friend and I know that we must respect the rulings of the judiciary. There has been too much bashing of the judiciary in the past 20 years, and that does not help our society. They made that decision, and we abide by it. We must now prosecute in this country, and we will do so urgently.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Not long after my election, I met a constituent who had seen their family members brutally killed during the Rwandan genocide. Her story was heartbreaking. It is unbearable for her that one of the alleged perpetrators of those horrific acts of violence now lives in her town and is free to continue with his family life without fear of extradition. She is asking when she will see justice for her brothers.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman will have heard my earlier answers. As the police progress whatever cases they have, we stand ready to support them. Subject to the complexities and the courts, I hope we will see prosecutions sooner rather than later.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Anybody visiting Rwanda will recognise a spirit of reconciliation and a real desire to move on from the absolutely horrific events of 1994. That is backed up by a sense of justice, often through the specially arranged local courts. If Rwanda has done the right thing, why cannot we?

Mr Wallace: Rwanda's doing the right thing has meant ensuring the rule of law, separation of powers, respect for the judiciary, successful prosecutions and fair trials. Those are the same principles that we believe in in this country. We must respect the judiciary and its rulings if we are to set an example around the world. The Rwandan courts seem to manage that. We will respect our judiciary's ruling and will seek to prosecute in this country.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I, too, have visited Rwanda, although it was with the all-party group on agriculture and food for development, so I saw a far more positive vision of the country. It is shocking to go round the stunning countryside and reflect on the fact that it was once steeped in bloodshed. Has the Minister had conversations with his colleagues in the Department for International Development? The number of survivors of the genocide is dwindling as the years pass. Between 250,000 and 500,000 women were deliberately targeted with rape, and many were deliberately infected with HIV. Working with the survivors can perhaps help us to gather evidence and eventually bring people to justice.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Lady makes some valid suggestions. I am obviously not the Minister for Africa or the DFID Minister, but I will write to my colleagues and ask them to write to her to explain what they are doing. I will seek any suggestions she has about how to build a better policy.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The alleged perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide are Rwandan citizens, are they not? The public in this country will view with disbelief the fact that we are not returning them to justice in their own country. For those people to be at large and in receipt of social security benefits just makes the situation even worse. If in 1970, 25 years on from the horrific events of the second world war, there were alleged Nazi war criminals in this country and the Government were refusing to extradite them for trial in West Germany, Poland and Israel, that would have been unacceptable, as is this.

Mr Wallace: Perhaps I can correct my hon. Friend. The Government are not refusing to extradite them; we sought to extradite them to Rwanda to face justice. The court took a different view and said that it did not feel that they would face a fair trial if we did so. We have to abide by the court's ruling, so we will instead seek to prosecute them in the United Kingdom. We think that is the best outcome. Whether they are citizens of the United Kingdom, Rwanda or anywhere else, we must abide by our article obligations under the European convention on human rights.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): In a few weeks' time, I will join Nottingham's Rwandan community to commemorate 25 years since the genocide. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), does the Minister appreciate the impact on survivors who have made their home in the United Kingdom of our country not being seen to be doing everything possible to ensure that those who are guilty of crimes against humanity are brought to justice?

Mr Wallace: I understand the hon. Lady's point. Can she communicate to her Rwandan community that the Government spent £3 million trying to extradite those people so they could face justice in Rwanda? That was not possible, so this country and the police are investing to ensure we seek justice in the United Kingdom. That is not being passive and doing nothing; it is doing something.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I was privileged to be on the first Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation to Rwanda last November. It truly is a glorious country. The theme across all the meetings we took part in, whether with the Foreign Minister, in reconciliation villages or with district mayors, is that no one will or wants to forget the genocide. Those people deserve justice. One of the Foreign Minister's concerns was our apparent unwillingness to investigate the allegations against the alleged perpetrators of the genocide. The Minister knows that in 18 months' time, Rwanda will host the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. How can the UK Parliament, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the UK Government sit with the Rwandans in Kigali talking about common

[Chris Elmore]

purpose around security and safety, when it appears that we do not take their concerns and their need for reconciliation and justice seriously in the UK system?

Mr Wallace: I dispute the picture the hon. Gentleman is painting about the Government's and Parliament's commitment to Rwanda. Plenty of friends of Rwanda who care about the consequences of the genocide in 1994 have rightly stood up to ask questions. This Government, the previous Government, the previous Labour Government and this House have been great supporters of the steps that Rwanda has taken since 1994. We are not doing nothing. We tried to extradite individuals so they could face trial. The court took a different view, and then we started an investigation. We have also been running other investigations into war crimes, and we will continue to do so.

Windrush Compensation Scheme

1.18 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if he will make a statement on the Windrush compensation scheme.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Righting the wrongs done to the Windrush generation has been at the forefront of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's priorities. Last week, on 3 April, she made a statement to this House setting out the detail of the compensation scheme and announcing that it is now open to claims.

The Government deeply regret what has happened to some members of the Windrush generation and the launch of the compensation scheme marks a key milestone in righting the wrongs they have experienced. The scheme will provide payments to eligible individuals who did not have the right documentation to prove their status in the UK and suffered adverse effects on their life as a result. These could range from a loss of employment or access to housing, education or NHS healthcare, to emotional distress or a deterioration in mental and physical health.

Information on the scheme is now available. The claim forms and guidance notes can be found on the gov.uk website or requested from the freephone helpline. The scheme rules and caseworker guidance were also published online on 3 April. The helpline is already receiving calls and claim forms are being sent out. The Home Office has also started a series of engagement events. The first event was held in Brixton last Friday and the next event is scheduled for Southampton this Friday.

In due course, we will publish information on the scheme through our existing monthly reports to the Home Affairs Committee, including information on the number of claims submitted, the number of claims paid and the overall amount paid out by the scheme.

Mr Lammy: I should not need to remind anyone in this House that the Windrush scandal is a national disgrace. At least 11 people who were wrongly deported from the UK by their own Government have died. At least 164 British citizens were wrongly deported or detained. Home Office officials have told the media that 15,000 individuals may have been harmed by the contempt that their Department showed.

Last week, one year since the scandal broke, the Home Secretary finally announced the compensation scheme, to begin the process of reconciliation for the Government's grievous errors. The Home Secretary apologised again, on behalf of the Government, for the failings and repeated his promise to do right by the Windrush generation. Crucially, he told members of this House:

"There is no cap on the scheme"

and

"it will be based on people's needs".—[*Official Report*, 3 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 1048.]

His words seem to have provided false reassurance.

In the response to the Windrush compensation scheme document that the Home Secretary brought to this House, there was no detail of caps. Instead, that was

quietly published online in a separate compensation scheme rules document, slipped out later on 3 April. MPs therefore had no chance to scrutinise or question the truth that his Department had set out incredibly strict caps to be awarded for different losses—a £500 payment for legal costs incurred; £500 for people who had been denied the chance to go to university; £1,000 for those wrongly obliged to leave the country under a so-called voluntary return scheme; and a mere £10,000 for people who were wrongly deported. Victims have correctly described these payments as “peanuts” and “insultingly low”.

I say to the Minister: £10,000 is less than one Secretary of State’s gross salary per month. Is that all that a person will have lost if they have been locked up, if they have been deported, if they have been made homeless, because £10,000 is all that they would get from her Department? Is this all it costs someone to be denied access to their family and friends for years or decades—to their own country? Is this the price that you put on my constituents being deported for no wrongdoing and nothing that they have themselves done? Is this how this Government value the lives of black Britons? I say to the Minister: you promised to do right by the Windrush generation, but quite rightly many of them think that they have been misled.

Let this be the final betrayal of the Windrush generation. Scrap the caps, and compensate them properly for the wrongs that have been done to them.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. He is of course right to emphasise how important it is that we right these wrongs. I would like to give some further explanation. It is important to reflect that while we have worked very closely with Martin Forde to establish both the tariff-based scheme and actuals, so where people could evidence specific losses, they would be reimbursed for those losses, actually these different heads of claim, which can be claimed for, need not be in the singular but can be cumulative. There is also a discretionary category, which will enable people to claim for other losses, not necessarily identified within the scheme, which is uncapped. *[Interruption.]* The detail is provided in the scheme online, but it is important to reflect that while there is a tariff set at £10,000 for somebody who was wrongly deported, of course that could be in conjunction with other parts of the claim, which could add up to significant sums in addition to that.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In addition to the Windrush compensation, can my right hon. Friend say when we will see pay-outs for the Chagos compensation scheme, which was set several years ago at £40 million to that exiled community over 10 years?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend will be conscious that this urgent question is about the Windrush compensation scheme, but he will no doubt be reassured to hear that last week, when I met high commissioners from across the Commonwealth, that issue was raised with me, and I will be working closely with Home Office officials to update him on that.

Mr Speaker: Ooh, it is very striking to see the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and the right hon. Member for Sutton

Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) beetling off together. It is almost certainly a conspiracy—but probably a conspiracy in the public interest, I feel sure.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this important urgent question.

The whole House knows that the Windrush generation was let down by successive Governments, Labour and Conservative, but with this derisory compensation scheme, the Windrush generation has been let down once again. I draw it to the attention of the House that although I did get early sight of the Home Secretary’s statement on 3 April, I was not provided with early sight of the scheme rules, and I appreciate the opportunity to question the Minister on them today.

This scheme compares very unfavourably with the criminal injuries compensation scheme, whose awards are aligned with compensation for loss under common law. Claimants are also allowed a statutory right of appeal of awards. They are also allowed legal aid for those appeals. None of that is true in any meaningful sense in the case of the Windrush victims. How can the Minister possibly justify that?

The Opposition believe that the Home Office must pay for losses actually incurred. For instance, claimants will be paid just £1,264 for denial of access to child benefit. It is easy to quantify what people would have lost altogether. Why cannot they get that exact sum of money back, plus interest? There is only £500 for denial of access to free healthcare. It is easy to quantify how much people had to spend when they had to access private healthcare. Why cannot they get that money back?

On awards, the scheme provides compensation for detention. However, in the false imprisonment case of *Sapkota v. Secretary of State for the Home Department*, the courts upheld three common law principles. First, detention is more traumatic for a person of good character. Secondly, a higher rate of compensation is payable for the first hour. Thirdly, historic damages awarded in precedent cases must be adjusted and uplifted to present-day values. The deputy High Court judge in that case awarded Mr Sapkota £24,000. This proposed scheme provides nothing like those common law damages.

The amounts offered for wrongful denial of access to higher education are pitiful. The scheme offers just £500, but all the research shows that the lifetime benefit of access to higher education is counted in tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of pounds.

This scheme is shoddy, unfair and unjust. Ministers did not make all the information available to Her Majesty’s Opposition when we were able to respond to the scheme. Some might say—I will not say it—that Ministers were attempting to conceal the reality of the derisory nature of their scheme. Above all, the Home Secretary said there was no cap. These tariffs are a cap. We are asking Ministers, even at this late stage, to review these unfair tariffs, remove the cap, and give this generation the justice they deserve.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments, but given that the rules and guidance were published on the same day as the Home Secretary made

[*Caroline Nokes*]

the statement, it is somewhat unfair to suggest any attempt to conceal the scheme. Far from it: we have sought to publicise the scheme and to reach out to posts across the world with a selection of communication tools, and we invited high commissioners into the Home Office last Thursday to emphasise the scheme to them.

I will comment briefly on the published Home Office *ex gratia* scheme that was already in place and to which the Home Office and Martin Forde referred when considering this scheme. The *ex gratia* scheme provides a maximum £1,000 for someone who has been wrongfully deported. In arriving at the £10,000 figure for deportation, the Government considered that alongside the case law evidence of courts awarding a range of damages subject to individual case details. We regarded £10,000 as a more appropriate figure than the £1,000 in the existing scheme, which has been in place for many years.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the scheme of review. We have put in place a two-tier review: first, an internal review, whereby someone who is not content with the original decision can have it referred to a senior caseworker who was not involved in the original decision; and, secondly, independent of the Home Office, another tier of review will be considered by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs independent adjudicator.

With regard to caps on payments, this scheme is both tariff and actuals-based. The right hon. Lady raised the issue of those who might have been denied NHS care, where the tariff scheme involves an award of £500. However, if an individual incurred private healthcare costs, the actuals will of course be repaid. The Home Office is determined to work with its own information and with data held by other Departments and indeed by individuals more widely, so that we help claimants to establish their actual level of loss, where that is the most appropriate route.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on granting this urgent question, and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on tabling it. I commend the Minister for her work on the scheme; it is one that I very much welcome. How accurate are press reports that up to 600 people may have made false or fraudulent claims to the scheme?

Caroline Nokes: It is absolutely right to reflect that the scheme has been open only for very few days so far, but we have received claims, registered them and sent out claim forms, which we are expecting back. I am not aware of any fraudulent claims to this scheme, and I am very conscious that we have put in place a rigorous process, which will enable all claims to be assessed fairly and indeed with full rigour. It is important to reflect that the Home Office is determined to work with individual claimants. There may be cases in which Home Office data enable us to assist people to determine the level of claim, and we are absolutely determined to do that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this important urgent question. It is imperative that the victims of the Windrush scandal are compensated justly for the terrible treatment that they endured.

I was a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights which took evidence from two of the victims of this disgraceful scandal. Anyone who heard their testimony about the effect of wrongful detention, and of years of persecution and threatened deportation, would regard some of the amounts in this scheme as derisory. After a year-long wait for the compensation scheme, it is disappointing that it has serious flaws, some of which have already been enumerated by others. It seems to be a great deal more mean than was suggested by the Home Secretary at the Dispatch Box, when he said that there would be no cap on the scheme. A cap, however, has clearly been introduced through the back door by applying internal caps on pay-outs, which will equate in effect to caps on how much individuals receive.

As has been said, some of the pay-outs under the scheme are wholly unacceptable: £250 per month for people who were rendered homeless as a result of that unjust treatment; or a maximum award of £500 for legal affairs. The Home Secretary refuses to compensate people for the full cost of immigration law advice; he claims that they do not need legal advice to make an immigration application. Any of us who deal with immigration matters in our constituency surgeries knows that not to be the case. Those of us who study closely the Home Office files of the individuals who gave evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights will tell you that only with the assistance of lawyers did they manage to disentangle themselves from this mess.

Is it not time for the Home Secretary to admit that removing legal aid from immigration matters was a huge error? The Government must fully compensate those of the Windrush generation who had to pay out of their own pockets to defend themselves against that state injustice. Will the Minister accept that the minimal pay-outs under this scheme will achieve nowhere near justice for such people? Does she agree that, if the Government were truly serious about rectifying the wrongs of the scandal, they would look at this scheme anew and scrap the hostile environment, which already threatens to have the same impact on European Union citizens applying for settled status.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her questions. She commented on the long wait for the scheme. She will of course recognise that not only did we appoint Martin Forde as an independent adviser to the scheme, but he came to the Home Office to ask for additional time, so that the consultation period could be open for longer. More than 1,400 responses were received to the consultation, and it was absolutely right to give adequate time for the responses to be considered carefully and thoroughly.

The hon. and learned Lady will be aware that the scheme includes both a tariff category and actuals. It is important to reflect that, where actuals have been accrued, the Home Office seeks to reimburse people through those fees. However, we recognise that it may be hard for people to provide evidence of actuals, which is why it was so necessary to put a tariff scheme in place as well, so that people would not be dependent simply on being able to provide the evidence.

The hon. and learned Lady made a wider point about the complexity of the Home Office's immigration scheme. She will no doubt welcome the consultation on that being carried out by the Law Commission. If she has

not already done so, I hope that she responds to that consultation before it closes, which I believe to be imminent.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Out of darkness can come light, and I therefore welcome today's announcement, which builds on the earlier announcement and progresses the whole issue of compensation for those badly affected in the Windrush immigration scandal. In the Immigration Minister's report, I particularly welcome paragraph 4.18, which clearly lays out compensation for employment, and 4.20, which does the same for benefits. I have one constituent—possibly two, but one definitely—who will deserve compensation in both those categories. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister confirm news about the telephone hotline and tell us how our constituents may access help with application forms, which can be a challenge, for the older generation especially?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is right to point out that claim forms can sometimes be difficult and onerous, for the elderly in particular. We deliberately designed the form after speaking to members of the Windrush generation, so that the language used was as simple and straightforward as possible. In addition, we made provision with Citizens Advice, so that it can assist people with their claims. Individuals from my hon. Friend's constituency of Gloucester need only make contact with the helpline—I understand that the average wait time for an answer last week was just 18 seconds. His constituents should make contact with the helpline and they might then be referred to Citizens Advice, which will be able to provide assistance with making a claim.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I too congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this important question. Compensation is just £1,000 for those individuals who were forced to leave this country under the so-called voluntary return scheme because they were unable to prove that they were justifiably able to reside here. Many people received letters from the Home Office warning them that they would need to leave the country because they were here illegally. How can the Minister justify paying compensation of only £1,000 to those who were forcibly removed from the country?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is right to point out that serious wrongs were done to members of the Windrush generation. That is why we set up the Windrush taskforce and put in place a compensation scheme, which was designed with the assistance of our independent adviser, Martin Forde. I recognise her, but it is important that we reflect on the advice that we were given and seek to have a scheme that is fair.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the urgent question from the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), whom I congratulate. I understand why the scheme is in the form that it is, but does the Minister agree that what is most important is that the end result is seen to be fair, particularly to those mentioned by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the people whom we saw in the Joint Committee on Human Rights and who were detained unjustly for considerable lengths of time? Does the

Minister agree that the end sum—adding all these bits together—should be seen in the eyes of the public as fair for what people in those circumstances have been through?

Caroline Nokes: I commend my hon. Friend for his work on the JCHR; I certainly recognise the moving and compelling testimony that the Committee listened to during the course of its inquiry. It is absolutely right that we reflect on the advice that we have received, that we seek to make the scheme as fair as possible, and that we put in place a scheme that can respond quickly and efficiently to claims. That is why we will have a taskforce that will be 120 strong at full complement. We have also made provision for individual claims for compensation to be split, so that the quick and easy parts of the claims to assess can be split off and paid immediately.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The report of the Public Accounts Committee highlighted that this scandal does not stop with the Windrush generation, but that thousands of other Commonwealth citizens are affected, and my own caseload bears that out. When the Home Secretary came before the House to make his statement, he was not specific about whether the Home Office would go through the lists of people, identify those who could be affected and proactively contact them. Will the Minister either make that commitment today or acknowledge that the Home Office systems are just not fit for this purpose?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary did make it clear last week that the scope of this scheme is not limited to Caribbean nationals and that almost all Commonwealth nationals who arrived before 1 January 1973 will be eligible to apply. It is important that we are working across the Commonwealth to highlight and emphasise to the high commissioners and our posts the wide cohort of people who will be eligible to apply, so that they can work with those people and claims can be settled.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I have previously raised the issue of the role for those affected in helping to design the scheme. Now it is in operation, will there continue to be a place for that input?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Last week, the Home Secretary hosted an event for those affected, which was also attended by Wendy Williams, who is conducting the review, and Martin Forde. I was particularly struck by a number of individuals I spoke to who emphasised the need for continuing outreach, and that is why we are holding a programme of events across the country. Martin Forde has on many occasions reflected to me that this is about building and rebuilding trust, and I am particularly grateful to all those who have helped us to reach out to members of the Windrush generation so that we can try to do exactly that.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for requesting it. Does the Minister feel that £1,000 is an appropriate minimum award for injury to feelings in order to compensate black Caribbean people who felt

[Janet Daby]

that they were forced to leave this country and, indeed, left this country? These people have experienced many emotional traumas, including the loss of sleep, anger, fear, trepidation, loss of appetite, loss of earnings, vulnerability, fear and ongoing feelings of depression. Is that minimum fee of £1,000 just compensation?

Caroline Nokes: As the hon. Lady pointed out repeatedly, that is the minimum amount. Of course, the table of actuals and tariffs very clearly emphasises that there are sections for impact on daily life, with a range of awards, and for discretionary circumstances, where there is no cap. It is really important that we work to ensure that we reflect the impact on people's daily life and on their mental wellbeing, and I believe that this scheme enables us to do that.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Minister acknowledge that one of the causes of the Windrush scandal in the first place was the disproportionate level of documentation from many years ago demanded by the Home Office to enable individuals to exercise their rights? It is rapidly becoming clear that the same mistake is being made in relation to this compensation scheme, so will the Minister urgently review not just the compensation cap that we have heard about, but also the scheme's documentary requirements, so that no one is denied compensation due to missing documents from past decades?

Caroline Nokes: We have sought to have a scheme that is based on both tariffs and actuals, so that those who cannot provide evidence will be able to go down the tariffs route and not be expected to provide the evidence that those going down the actuals route would be able to provide. As I have already said, the Home Office wants to work with claimants to ensure that where evidence can be found—either from within Home Office records or from other Government Departments—we do exactly that, so that people are supported to get the compensation to which they are entitled.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Detaining innocent people and threatening them with deportation is not only wholly unacceptable; it is dehumanising. The treatment suffered by my constituent, Paulette Wilson, was absolutely appalling. Why did the Government not come clean about these caps last week when we were in the Chamber questioning the Home Secretary? And how on earth did the Government come up with the figure of £500 per 24-hour period for the first 30 days of detention and £300 per 24-hour period for the subsequent 60 days? How were these amounts arrived at?

Caroline Nokes: As I am sure the hon. Lady will have heard me say, the amounts were arrived at in consultation with our independent adviser, Martin Forde, and by looking at both the ex gratia scheme that was already in place at the Home Office and at case law. She is right to say that detention is absolutely wrong for those who have no reason to find themselves in that situation. I have apologised to her constituent, Paulette Wilson. One can only hang one's head in shame at the way in which the Home Office treated not just Paulette Wilson,

but too many individuals of the Windrush generation. We are still ashamed of what happened and are desperately trying to put things right via this scheme.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My constituent kept close records; his loss of earnings is over £50,000 and his solicitors' fees run into the thousands. But this 59-year-old, who had previously worked all his life, has had his mental health so severely damaged by the failings of this Government that he now cannot hold down a job. First, will the Minister tell me exactly how people are supposed to provide actuals for jobs that they were not allowed to have? Secondly, given that my constituent is unlikely to work again, what provision is there within the compensation scheme for future loss of earnings?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is right to point out the severe impact on individuals of the Windrush generation. As I said previously, the Home Office is determined to work alongside HMRC, which will have evidence of previous earnings and the earnings level at which her constituent would have been, and to work with him through his own evidence. She indicated that he had kept close records through HMRC to ensure that he is properly compensated. As I mentioned earlier, there is also a discretionary element to the scheme that in some instances may well provide redress that is not otherwise identified in the tables.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and I are meeting constituents from Windrush families this Saturday, and I think there will be very considerable interest in the engagement events that the Minister mentioned, so it would be helpful to know whether she can provide local MPs with details of when these events might be coming to our areas. Due to the deep mistrust and scepticism about the Home Office, there may be reluctance to supply full information to enable a cost-based claim to be submitted, so will the Minister guarantee that there will be a firewall in place to ensure that any data supplied for the purpose of seeking compensation under this scheme is not used by the Home Office or any other Government Department for other purposes?

Caroline Nokes: Absolutely, I am happy to give that commitment. The hon. Lady makes an important point about the importance of outreach and of building trust. I am absolutely determined to do what she has asked and to provide information to hon. Members across the House of when there will be outreach events in their constituencies or close by. I recognise that, in the case of Manchester, a number of Members are close by. We will certainly provide that information.

As I mentioned, in many instances it is those from the community who can provide the greatest reassurance. I was struck last week when talking to two gentlemen from Birmingham by the emphasis they put on the work that their charity does in supporting individuals. I have taken a close interest in that and looked to see how the Home Office can provide additional assistance to such individuals, who provide such a useful bridge between Home Office officials and the community.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The first engagement event on the Windrush scheme took place on Friday in Brixton, just outside my

constituency. It was called at just a day's notice, it was not publicised systematically and I received an email late on Friday evening informing me of the event. That is simply not meaningful engagement and, frankly, it does not treat the community affected by the scandal with respect.

The application form requires a very high level of proof—for example, receipts from hostel accommodation used when someone was made homeless. That is comparable to the burden of proof that led many Windrush citizens to be wrongly denied their rights in the first place. Will the Minister agree to review the scheme to ensure that it works for Windrush citizens, is accessible to all and delivers the justice and recompense to which they are entitled? Will she undertake genuinely meaningful engagement, properly publicised, in the communities that are most affected?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the publicity surrounding events and the importance of doing it in a meaningful way. I am conscious that we have a schedule of events planned, but I am never happy when I think that information is provided at too short notice. I will undertake to ensure that that does not happen and that not only Members but affected members of the community are given adequate information about when events will take place.

We designed the application form and scheme in consultation with members of the Windrush generation, and we sought to make the form as straightforward as possible. Of course, there are sections that will be relevant to some claimants and not to others. I certainly hope it is clear that people are not expected to fill in every single section of the form. Where they are asked for evidence, that is if evidence is available. The Home Office is determined to work alongside individuals to ensure that where evidence is not available, people are assisted either to find it or directed towards the tariff route, where evidence will not be required to the same extent. It is important that we get the balance right, but the hon. Lady has made some important points that we will certainly take on board.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I have been in correspondence with the Home Office for almost a year about the case of my constituent, Bobbi Vetter, who came to the UK as a baby 54 years ago and has lived nowhere else but the UK. Last year, she was offered a job in Oban but could not prove residency for a six-year period while she was here—a time when she was having and raising her children. Bobbi was unable to take that job and has been forced to live on universal credit. What compensation will Bobbi be entitled to? Will the Minister resolve to look at Bobbi's case urgently to right this terrible injustice?

Caroline Nokes: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to stand at the Dispatch Box and indicate a level of compensation for his constituent, but I will very happily take away the details of the case, if he will provide them, and look into it.

Tobacco Companies (Transparency)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.53 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require tobacco companies to publish sales and marketing data; and for connected purposes.

The UK has made remarkable progress over the past two decades in reducing smoking levels. In 2000, more than one in four adults in England smoked. By last year, that had declined to fewer than one in six. Since the last tobacco control plan was published in 2011, smoking rates in England have fallen by a quarter, from just below 20% to just below 15% in 2017, bringing the estimated number of smokers down to 6.1 million. At the same time, smoking rates among children have fallen rapidly. After two decades of little change, between 2000 and 2016 the proportion of 15-year-olds who were regular smokers fell from 23% to 7%—a decline of more than two thirds.

Those reductions, which have meant large consequential improvements in public health, have happened because of strict tobacco legislation, progressive tax rises, public education and the provision of support services for those who wish to quit. We have had a succession of measures including the launch of “stop smoking” services; health warnings on tobacco products; a ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship; a ban on smoking in enclosed public places; raising the minimum age of purchase to 18; pictorial health warnings on packs; the prohibition of cigarette vending machines; prohibiting displays of tobacco in shops; and prohibiting smoking in private cars carrying under 18s. We introduced larger graphic health warnings on packs and then became one of the first international adopters of plain standardised packaging for cigarettes. We have since had the ban on cross-border advertising of e-cigarettes.

However, smoking still accounts for approximately 79,000 deaths a year in England alone, and therefore remains the top priority for public health policy. It is the leading cause of preventable premature death and is responsible for half the difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest in our communities. Smoking causes lung cancer, respiratory disease and heart disease, as well as numerous cancers in other organs, including the lip, mouth, throat, bladder, kidney, stomach, liver and cervix.

Although youth smoking rates have fallen to their lowest since surveys began in 1982, between 2014 and 2016 more than 127,000 children a year aged 11 to 15 started to smoke in the UK, according to Cancer Research UK. That amounts to about 350 young people a day, which is equivalent to 22 minibus loads of secondary school children. Once someone has started, it is difficult to stop, with two thirds of those who try smoking going on to become regular smokers.

The World Health Organisation framework convention on tobacco control, to which the UK is a party, obliges Governments to implement stringent control of the tobacco industry for the protection of public health to a greater extent than for any other legal consumer product. That includes the monitoring and surveillance of industry behaviour and ensuring that public policy is protected

[Bob Blackman]

from the commercial and vested interests of the tobacco industry. Article 20 of the framework convention sets out requirements for parties to carry out monitoring and surveillance of the industry, and provides for the collection and dissemination of such data.

It should be remembered that two of the four major transnational tobacco manufacturers, British American Tobacco and Imperial, are domiciled in the UK and are two of the largest companies listed on the London stock market, even though all cigarette manufacturing in the UK has ceased. The UK therefore has an international duty to ensure that the industry is as tightly regulated as possible, and that this regulation and the provision of information about the industry support tobacco control in other countries.

Publicly available data on tobacco sales, profits, marketing and research inform the development of tobacco control and tax policy, and aid the identification and understanding of illicit market trends over time at local level. For example, academic analysis of industry pricing strategies, using commercially available data purchased from Nielsen, was used by the Treasury and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to inform the decision to implement a minimum excise tax. However, commercially available data are not comprehensive and are often available only at extremely high cost.

World Health Organisation guidelines on the implementation of articles 9 and 10 of the framework convention state that

“information disclosed to governmental authorities in accordance with these guidelines, such as information on ingredients, product characteristics and the market, may also contribute to raising public awareness and advancing tobacco control policy.”

The Bill would therefore require the tobacco industry to provide the following information: at national and international level, and on an annual basis, the profits and taxes paid; at national level, and on a monthly basis, brand-specific price and sales data for all products, marketing spend by category, including spending on corporate social responsibility initiatives, and research spending; and at local authority level, and on an annual basis, sales data by product type for all products, including factory-made cigarettes, hand-rolled tobacco, heat not burn and e-cigarettes. It is already known that tobacco manufacturers collect that data, and some of it is supplied to HMRC. The Bill would require the data to be published, either by the industry or through HMRC.

It has been argued that the data cannot be published because of taxpayer confidentiality. However, that has not prevented similar legislation from being enacted in other jurisdictions. Regulations in Canada and New Zealand require publication of the data. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission issues regular reports on the tobacco industry, covering that exact data.

Making such data available to UK researchers and policy makers would greatly help the development, implementation and evaluation of policy measures designed to reduce smoking prevalence. Such data at local level would also provide a useful insight into the illicit market; for example, significant reductions in local sales over a short period are likely to be an indicator of illicit sales activity.

It should be noted that tobacco manufacturers remain enormously profitable, in the UK and internationally, but a recent study shows that they pay virtually no corporation tax. In 2016, Imperial Brands, British American Tobacco and Gallaher together made UK operating profits in excess of £1 billion yet paid just £83.6 million in corporation tax. Over the past seven years, during which time corporation tax rates have varied between 20% and 28%—and often much less—British American Tobacco has paid virtually no corporation tax, including for four years in a row when it paid nothing at all. From 2014, Imperial Brands was permitted to stop reporting UK-adjusted profits. BAT and Philip Morris International have never done so, and none of the four transnational companies report profit before tax in the UK.

The provision and publication of data on sales and related information would support the development of tax policies that ensured that the tobacco industry paid tax at a level that properly reflected the damages it causes. The industry could easily absorb any additional costs of providing the information required under the Bill.

In summary, the Bill's benefits to the Government and to public health would include better understanding of market developments to inform the development of tobacco control and tobacco tax policy, for example on tax structure; enabling future academic research on the price sensitivity of tobacco consumption to support work already carried out by HMRC; better identification and understanding of trends in the illicit market over time at local level; the development of proxy indicators for smoking prevalence changes at local level to enable local authorities to determine the effectiveness of their tobacco control activities; better understanding of the marketing strategies of the tobacco industry; and more accurate assessment of whether tobacco companies are paying appropriate levels of corporation tax.

2.3 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I refer at the outset to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I do not intend to speak for long, because I know that many Members wish to get on to this afternoon's important debate, but the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—in fact, I consider him to be my hon. Friend—should not pass by without some scrutiny.

The hon. Gentleman has been tireless in his campaigning to reduce the number of people who smoke and the harm caused by smoking. I applaud him and others for their commitment to such a good cause, but I am worried that the Bill misses the point and doubles up on what already happens under a European directive that effectively ceased the manufacturing of tobacco products in the United Kingdom.

Ever since the introduction of the European Union's tobacco products directive, tobacco companies have been required by law to provide the Government with all of their sales data and market research. E-cigarette manufacturers, which are now a significant employer in the United Kingdom, also have to submit the same information. Clearly, it is only right and proper that that information should be provided, and that is the kind of thing that we should keep in law after we finally win our independence from Brussels. The tax changes

mentioned by the hon. Gentleman are not, as far as I know, covered by the Bill and are a matter for the Treasury.

The European directive also requires that from May onwards, all tobacco products will be tracked, pack by pack, across the European Union, from factory to the precise retailer. That, of course, is to prevent a lot of smuggling and crime, which is incredibly important. That data will be available from May onwards, and the database will give the Government exact data about what products are where in the supply chain, so there is no need for the hon. Gentleman's Bill. The Government already have, or soon will have, all the data he suggests and, indeed, much more. The European directive goes even further and its provisions surpass the requirements suggested by the hon. Gentleman.

We know that vaping is 95% less harmful than smoking. There are already 3 million people in the United Kingdom who vape. More than half of them have given up smoking completely—and all without a penny of taxpayers' money. This is the free market solving a problem that previous Government campaigns have failed to solve. We should applaud that.

As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on vaping, I am pleased to welcome the House to the month of VApril—a month to celebrate the positive switch that smokers can make to vaping. The campaign is backed by businesses—both tobacco companies and independent e-cigarette businesses—and by consumers and retailers. I stress that the products are manufactured in the United Kingdom and keep people in employment in the United Kingdom, and that those people pay taxes in the United Kingdom. They are, therefore, incredibly important.

If the hon. Gentleman really wants to stop more people smoking, as I do, he needs to get behind vaping and work to tell more smokers about the difference and improvement it can make to their lives and health, with an approximately 95% reduction in harm compared with smoking. Far too many smokers have never even tried vaping, and far too many of them wrongly think that it is just as bad as smoking. As the Select Committee on Science and Technology was told just last year, we need to do more to set those people straight.

I do not want to divide the House. The hon. Gentleman deserves our respect for his years of campaigning to reduce smoking, but the Government already have all the information they need and the Bill is already out of date.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Bob Blackman, Alex Cunningham, Sir Kevin Barron, Ian Mearns, Dr Philippa Whitford, Norman Lamb and Caroline Lucas present the Bill.

Bob Blackman accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 April, and to be printed (Bill 377).

Exiting the European Union (Sanctions)

Mr Speaker: We come now to the intended debate on four motions—specifically, motions 2 to 5—and I suggest that, with the leave of the House, we will debate motions 2 to 4 on Sanctions and motion 5 on Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) together. To move the first of the motions in a debate on all four, I call Sir Alan Duncan.

2.10 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I beg to move,

That the Burma (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 136), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Motion 3—*Sanctions*—

That the Venezuela (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 135), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

Motion 4—*Sanctions*—

That the Iran (Sanctions) (Human Rights) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 134), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

Motion 5—*Exiting the European Union (Sanctions)*—

That the Republic of Guinea-Bissau (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations (S.I., 2019, No. 554), which were laid before this House on 15 March, be approved.

Sir Alan Duncan: As you have said and with your permission, Mr Speaker, I think the House will appreciate it if I consider the four statutory instruments together. In speaking to the Burma (Sanctions) (EU Exit) regulations, I will also speak to the Venezuela (Sanctions) (EU Exit) regulations, the Iran (Sanctions) (Human Rights) (EU Exit) regulations and the Guinea-Bissau (Sanctions) (EU Exit) regulations. These regulations provide the required details of these four sanctions regimes, but they do not set out which individuals or entities will actually be sanctioned under them. In a no-deal scenario, we will publish on exit day the full list of those we are sanctioning under our UK legislation.

Hon. Members will be well aware of the importance of sanctions. They are a key element of our approach to our most important international priorities. They help to defend our national interests, support our foreign policy and protect our national security. They also demonstrate our support for the rules-based international order. The UK has been a leading contributor to the development of multilateral sanctions in recent years. We have been particularly influential in guiding the EU's approach and, when we move the EU's sanctions regimes to the UK in a no-deal scenario, we will carry over their policy effect. I will say more about that in just a moment.

We are committed to maintaining our sanctions capabilities and leadership role after we leave the EU. Hon. Members will recall that the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 provides the UK with the legal powers to impose, update or lift sanctions after we leave the EU. This was the first major legislative step in creating an independent UK sanctions framework.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I am pleased that the Minister has said that the EU sanctions list will, in effect, be rolled over. At this early point in his contribution, notwithstanding that we are talking about sanctions on three specific countries—plus the EU one at the end—will he give the House an assurance that there is no immediate intention to change the sanctions list from the one we will adopt from the EU?

Sir Alan Duncan: I can confirm that there is no such intention. Indeed, the intention and the expectation is that the existing regimes in the EU sanctions regime will be lifted and shifted, and put into ours. However, having scrutinised the individual elements of these, we will have to make sure that they all meet the threshold of evidence and justification that our own autonomous Act of Parliament requires. It is possible that something may not be carried over, but the expectation is that everything will be.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister mentioned the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. While we are talking about specific countries, that Bill, which is now an Act, did include the Magnitsky amendment. He referenced a list should the United Kingdom leave without a deal, and that general list would no doubt include other countries as well. In that regard, what is the current position of the Government on individuals named on a sanctions list in relation to the Magnitsky amendment, which is now part of an Act?

Sir Alan Duncan: I say to my hon. Friend that I will come on to that in just a second. I will answer the question raised in his intervention, but let me complete the introductory logic of what these four statutory instruments are intended to do.

While the Act set out the framework needed to impose our own independent sanctions, we need statutory instruments to set out the detail of each sanctions regime within that independent framework. Such statutory instruments set out the purposes of our regimes, as well as the criteria under which the Secretary of State may designate individuals and entities within the framework, and the types of restrictive measures imposed. I am grateful to the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments for its close and helpful scrutiny of these and other statutory instruments relating to sanctions regimes.

On the Magnitsky element of the Act of Parliament passed last year, that sanctions Act provides powers for the UK to impose sanctions to provide accountability for or to deter gross violations of human rights, and to promote compliance with international human rights law and respect for human rights. These powers are what is colloquially known as the Magnitsky amendment. The Government's focus so far has been on ensuring that we have the necessary secondary legislation in place to continue to implement existing EU and UN sanctions should we leave the EU without a deal. The statutory instruments we are debating today are part of this preparation.

Mark Pritchard: Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: No. Let me just take my hon. Friend through this, and then he can come back again if he wishes. I need to explain quite where the Magnitsky element fits in.

As a member of the EU or during an implementation period, EU sanctions will apply in the UK. We will look to use the powers provided by the sanctions Act to the fullest extent possible during this period, but there will be some limitations on the measures that we can impose autonomously. In order to impose national sanctions for human rights—the Magnitsky element—we will need to design and draft a statutory instrument and ensure the associated processes and structures are in place to be able to implement and manage a sanctions regime.

It is important that we set up a regime correctly to ensure sanctions meet the legal tests set out in the sanctions Act. As soon as the secondary legislation and associated structures are in place to ensure the continuation of EU and UN sanctions in the UK, we will turn to the consideration of UK national sanctions, including for human rights.

Mark Pritchard: The Minister is being very generous. May I ask him why not a single individual Russian is on any sanctions list at the moment? It is rather odd that the Government's position seems to be that the justification for no Russian being on any list is that we cannot do this until we leave the European Union, despite the fact that all the Baltic states have individual Russians on a sanctions list. If we are going to remain *de facto* within the European Union, surely the justification for taking action is going to continue.

Sir Alan Duncan: First, I say to my hon. Friend that this is not just against Russians. If people have violated human rights anywhere in the world, they could come within the scope of the Magnitsky clause I have been describing. I say again that the reason why we have not yet applied the Magnitsky elements of the sanctions Act is that the statutory instrument making it a bespoke part of that Act within UK autonomous law has not yet been made, and it that was done too rapidly—he will appreciate that we have had about 3,000 statutory instruments to get through this House because of EU exit—there would be a high risk of constant legal challenge, which we would like to avoid.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am a bit confused about the Government's attitude. The permanent under-secretary gave one reason why we could not have these sanctions in place already, the Foreign Secretary has given three different versions of why it could not happen and now the Minister has given yet another version of why it could not happen thus far. Part of it seems to be that the Government are not yet ready, which feels a bit like foot dragging to me, because I remember that the Government did not want this amendment in the first place, but the House insisted on it. The Government still seem to be arguing that we cannot do this because we are still a member of the European Union. In fact, Estonia and Lithuania have exactly those provisions, and nobody has thought to strike them down. There are 49 Russians listed in both those countries. Why can we not do it?

Sir Alan Duncan: What the hon. Gentleman says is not consistent with our legal advice. We have to make sure that any application of the Magnitsky legislation fits legally and properly within any implementation period that might exist. It would be easier and quicker, as it happens in this case, if we were to leave with no

deal—that is perhaps the only advantage of so doing that I can think of straight off the top of my head, but we will not go down that route.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Ind): Can the Minister therefore confirm—this is what I think he is saying—that all the individuals and entities currently sanctioned by the EU will remain sanctioned by the UK under these regulations? Given that the UK has less capacity than the EU collectively, what resources are being put in place to ensure that the UK continues to update the list of sanctioned individuals and groups, or will we simply mirror any updates made by the EU?

Sir Alan Duncan: I perhaps feel a little prime ministerial when I say that I refer the right hon. Lady to the answer I gave some moments ago, but the answer is the same: our intention is to transfer the EU sanctions, but because we have our own autonomous regime, the evidential threshold must be met. Therefore, everything is being studied closely to confirm that it fits within the evidential requirements of the sanctions Act.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind) *indicated dissent.*

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is shaking his head. He is welcome to intervene and say why, but I can assure him that that is exactly the position as I understand it at the moment.

Mike Gapes: I did not seek to intervene, but I am happy to. I am unclear. Is the Minister saying that, where there are currently sanctioned individuals, all of them without exception will continue to be sanctioned in the event of a no-deal Brexit, or that because the evidential requirements of the UK, acting autonomously, may be different from those that apply while we are in the European Union, some of those individuals will no longer, or could no longer, be sanctioned?

Sir Alan Duncan: As I said earlier, it is possible that, in exceptional circumstances, a person or an entity might not be transferred, but we do not expect that to be the case often, if at all. The intention is, wherever possible, to transfer the operation of the existing regime into our own autonomous legislation.

Chris Bryant: I think the Minister is saying that one reason why it will not be possible is that there are so many SIs that it is difficult to get the SI in place to deal with Magnitsky. I just wonder when he hopes the provisions will be available to the House and be able to be implemented.

Sir Alan Duncan: All I can say is that the timeline of many things at the moment is difficult to forecast, so I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not attempt to say exactly.

Chris Bryant: Just say when.

Sir Alan Duncan: As soon as we are practically able to do so.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Our American allies have a disagreement with our European allies about the extent of sanctions against Iran and how best to handle the difficulties with Iran. What thinking has

the Foreign Office given to an independent UK policy on this? Are there any merits in the American approach, or are all the merits with the European approach?

Sir Alan Duncan: If we are looking at individual cases such as that, we are straying slightly outside the terms of this debate, which is about the framework for the operation of sanctions in these four areas. We work closely with our European allies on the operation of the joint comprehensive plan of action, and we will continue to do so. However, we will of course look at all sanctions under the terms of the Act that we passed last year.

The four statutory instruments under consideration transfer into UK law the EU sanctions regimes on Burma, Venezuela, Guinea-Bissau and Iran—the human rights element of Iran, rather than the anti-nuclear side. In each case, the instruments seek to substantially mirror the measures in the corresponding EU regime, which include financial, immigration and trade measures.

These SIs were laid on a contingent basis to provide for the continuation of sanctions should we leave the EU without a deal. This would ensure that we have the necessary powers to impose sanctions on the countries in question from the date of exit. If we reach a deal, sanctions would continue to apply under EU law during any implementation period, and these SIs would not immediately be needed.

As I said at the beginning, should we leave the EU without a deal, we will publish the list of those sanctioned under these SIs and all our new sanctions SIs on exit day. We will seek to transfer EU designations in each case, but as I said earlier these decisions will be subject to the legal tests contained in the sanctions Act. Any EU listings that do not meet the tests would not then be implemented.

Hon. Members may recall that review and reporting requirements were incorporated into the sanctions Act. Hence, alongside these statutory instruments, we have published reports on the purposes of each regime and the penalties contained in them—these are known respectively as section 2 and section 18 reports. These reports, plus an explanatory memorandum for each SI, are available in the Vote Office should Members wish to read them in detail. The Government will also review each sanctions regime on a regular basis.

I would now like briefly to describe the purposes of each regime. The Burma sanctions regulations seek to encourage the Burmese security forces to comply with international human rights law and to respect human rights. The corresponding EU sanctions were established in their present form in April 2018, in response to systematic human rights violations by Burmese security forces since the summer of 2017.

The EU sanctions regime designates members of the Burmese security forces who were involved in human rights violations or abuses, or in the obstruction of humanitarian assistance activity or an independent investigation into the atrocities in Burma.

Mike Gapes: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. Is there any evidence that, since the imposition of those sanctions in 2018, the behaviour of the Burmese military towards the Rohingya or other minorities in the country has in any way improved?

Sir Alan Duncan: Again, I think that is straying into detailed analysis of the working of the sanctions, which is not the subject of these statutory instruments.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He will know that, since the implementation of those sanctions, the International Criminal Court has launched an investigation into the Burmese atrocities. What does he know about the status of that investigation? Does he anticipate an increase in the sanctions on Burma when this instrument comes into effect?

Sir Alan Duncan: Again, the purpose of this debate is not to look at the way the sanctions are working; it is merely to set up the legal framework in which they can be allowed to work under our autonomous regime.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I do not think we are straying too far. I think it will help people to make up their mind and make a good judgment. Just opening the envelope a little does not take anything away from what we are trying to achieve.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not as keen as you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to open the envelope quite so far, because I do not actually deal with Burma. However, if the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) has a really good question on Venezuela, I can give her chapter and verse. The responsibilities of Ministers are geographical in some respects and thematic in others. As she knows, I am in charge of sanctions law, rather than the operation of all geographical sanctions. I do not want to risk in any way giving the House information that is inaccurate or ill-informed.

Jo Stevens: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Perhaps he could ask his colleague who is in charge of Burma relationships whether he could write to me to let me know the answer to my question.

Sir Alan Duncan: I would be delighted to put that obligation on him—it causes me no difficulty whatever. Of course I will do that. In Foreign Office questions and in Westminster Hall, we have many discussions about issues of that sort—indeed, I encourage them, and we like to participate in them by giving as much information as we possibly can in response to any motion moved.

Chris Bryant: In relation to the situation in Venezuela, there has obviously been massive concern on both sides of the House about the massive number of people fleeing from Venezuela to other countries in Latin America. How does the Minister feel that the sanctions regime is working now, and is it likely to produce significant change?

Sir Alan Duncan: The answer is that we wish there was clearer evidence that they are working. I was at the meeting of European Foreign Ministers yesterday in Luxembourg, where Venezuela was the main topic over lunch. The hon. Gentleman is quite right that 3.6 million people have fled Venezuela. The latest forecast is that the collapse in Venezuela's economy will exceed that of Zimbabwe's economic collapse all that time ago and that it will collapse by over 25% this year. We are being

very careful to make sure that we target individuals around President Maduro and President Maduro himself, rather than the people who are suffering enough. He will appreciate, as I think the whole House does, that it is a massive challenge to design sanctions that hit the right people and do not hit the wrong people, who are, as I say, suffering enough. Any brilliant ideas he has would be willingly received, but we are working very closely with the EU and the Lima Group to ensure that any properly targeted sanctions we can possibly apply will be applied at the earliest opportunity.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab) *rose*—

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab) *rose*—

Sir Alan Duncan: At the risk of turning this into a general debate on Venezuela, I will give way to both hon. Gentlemen.

Conor McGinn: Given what the Minister has said, does he envisage an increase or a reduction in sanctions in relation to Venezuela when the UK has full autonomy over its sanctions policy?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is possible that we could do some things on our own and increase sanctions in that way. We have particular focus, through the City of London, on financial matters where we might have, if you like, the lead. However, it would be our wish and our intention to work in close harmony with the EU and the Lima Group of countries, the immediate neighbours of Venezuela, to make sure we all speak with one voice, rather than President Maduro being able to take advantage of there being a number of different voices around the world acting against him or commenting.

Matt Rodda: The Minister speaks very eloquently about the discussions that are currently under way. How does he feel the UK's very important traditional leadership role in pressing for sanctions against human rights abusers would be harmed by the prospect of a no-deal Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is a very fair question to ask whether, given the influential role we have had within the EU by being part of it, it will have a detrimental effect on the united front that sanctions offer to the world against those who need to be sanctioned. I think that because of our diplomatic network and diplomatic reach, and our dominance of financial markets through the City, instead of wanting to turn their back on us, should we leave the EU in that way members of the EU27 will still want to work with us very closely. I think we will continue to share in common the objectives we hold to bring the worst people to book through the workings of sanctions. We have made it very clear to the EU that we really hope that whatever happens we can continue to work together, hence our wish to fold existing EU sanctions regimes into our own legislation after we have left the EU. I will give way one more time and then I will just rattle on, if I may.

Joan Ryan: I am not in any way opposing the regulations, but if we are going to continue, and we should, to work closely with the EU—I agree with what the Minister said about a united front on sanctions, otherwise they

are pretty useless—we need to be clearer for the EU to understand where we will just be rolling forward its sanctions and where we might be doing something different. The question has been put two or three times, but I do not think the answer is very clear. I am worried that we hear a lot less about the purpose and the way in which they will be applied. I do not see how we can be expected to make a fully informed decision when we cannot have full information about the countries in question.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think the right hon. Lady may have misunderstood my answers. She is right that the question has been asked three times and I have answered three times, but this is not actually the moment we are announcing individual designations or decisions. What we are looking at today in the four statutory instruments is, in lay language, the framework within which any such designations can fit. I say once again, I think for the fourth or fifth time, that it is our intention to lift the EU sanctions regimes that exist at the moment and put them into our own regime once it is up and running, but we will follow the law to ensure there are no issues where we could unnecessarily be taken to court and be challenged. We will have rigorous standards, but we do not envisage our not transferring EU regimes. We do not envisage that happening very much, if at all. It would be quite rare.

I should just answer one point about whether the Foreign Office will have the resources to manage this regime. I think the answer is yes. We have increased the number of staff working on sanctions quite considerably, and we are confident that we will retain and increase the UK's capacity and capability after Brexit.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will let the hon. Gentleman slip through the net.

Gavin Robinson: I am very grateful to the Minister. I do not want to flog the issue, but in circumstances where there is an EU sanction proposed and it does not fit with our legislative test—that is quite right, given the framework he outlines—does he envisage those issues being brought before Parliament through a report or a ministerial statement? Will there be parliamentary engagement around that decision to not comply or follow through with the sanction that has been agreed at EU level?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not sure it would quite work in that way, but I am very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with our understanding of what we think the parliamentary engagement would be in any such decision to either list or not to list. Given that this is the early stage of our implementing the Act, I hope he can accept that as my commitment to him for the time being.

Having mentioned the Burma sanctions, the Venezuela sanctions, which we have been debating a bit, will: encourage the Venezuelan Government to abide by democratic principles, if only they would; respect human rights and the rule of law; refrain from the repression of civil society; and bring about a peaceful solution to the political crisis in Venezuela. The Iran human rights regulations are designed to encourage the Government of Iran to comply with international human rights law

and to respect human rights. The EU sanctions regime emerged partly in response to the Iranian Government's treatment of protestors in demonstrations against election fraud in 2009. The EU sanctions regime targets those who have been involved in the commission of serious human rights violations or abuses in Iran. The EU sanctions regime on Guinea-Bissau was established in 2012 and targets those who played a leading role in its 2010 mutiny and 2012 coup. It is designed to curb actions that undermine the country's peace, security or stability.

Hon. Members will note that human rights are a significant focus of the sanctions regime under consideration today. I hope I have adequately explained how the human rights element of the sanctions Act, the Magnitsky clause, will fit into the statutory instruments before us today. The four statutory instruments transfer into UK law well-established EU sanctions regimes that are in line with the UK's foreign policy priorities. They encourage human rights compliance, the rule of law, and security and stability in very difficult environments. I re-emphasise the importance of putting them in place. If this does not happen before exit day in a no-deal scenario, the UK would not be able to continue to properly implement the measures they contain. Therefore, Mr Deputy Speaker, I commend the regulations to the House.

2.38 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, I am afraid I have taken the exact contrary interpretation to the Minister of what this debate is about. I wish to comment in detail on all four regimes, rather than go over again the debates we had on the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill a year ago.

To start with Burma, I do not quite understand why the Burma sanctions are called Burma sanctions, not Myanmar sanctions. Anyway, they are called Burma sanctions. On behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, I want to say that we agree it is right to roll over the EU sanctions. The human rights abuses perpetrated by the Myanmar regime are terrible. It is only 18 months since 700,000 Rohingya Muslims fled the country, subject to an attempted genocide and systematic terror. We have debated that on several occasions but the more representations that I hear from Burma, the more it becomes clear that this is one of several problems. The Myanmar Government have simply not come to terms with the fact that they are in a multicultural, multi-ethnic country and they are perpetrating abuse in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan states against several minorities.

Fundamentally, we want to see the implementation of the Annan commission's recommendations on citizenship law. There will be elections in 2020, so there is not much time for that. On sanctions, when the Minister or the Foreign Office come to look at how an independent British regime might operate, we would suggest strengthening of two kinds—first, by extending the trade sanctions to the significant part of the Myanmar economy that is controlled by the military, and secondly, by introducing Magnitsky-style sanctions for key military figures, including, in particular, Min Aung Hlaing and Maung Soe.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not agree that until the fact that the Tatmadaw retains a fixed percentage of the Parliament is addressed, we will see continuing oppression from the military, because it has such control over the rest of Government?

Helen Goodman: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. One of the general problems has been that we were so pleased to see some reform in the country that we were not tough enough and sharp enough about what was going on.

On Venezuela, too, we agree that it is right to roll over the EU sanctions. The record of the Maduro Government since the collapse of the oil price has been one of significant and serious human rights abuses. As the Minister said, the fact that 3.6 million people have left the country and that we have starvation and medicine shortages is extremely serious. It is shocking to see that food aid has been blocked at the Colombian border. The first speech that I made when I was given this portfolio was in September 2017, and I condemned then the closing down of the legitimate National Assembly and the setting up of the fake constitutional Assembly. The elections in May 2018 were not free or fair. Political opponents have been jailed. There are reports that people who are in prison are being tortured. The National Assembly leader, Juan Guaidó, has been stripped of political immunity. We believe that 40 people have been killed in protests since the beginning of this year. All of that is unacceptable and reasonable justification for the continuation of sanctions.

Chris Bryant: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend just said. Is there not a further reason why this is not just a matter of Venezuela putting its own house in order? The truth is that the Colombian peace process will manage to move forward only if it does not have 1.5 million or 2 million people crossing the border and destabilising a process on which it was already difficult to get traction.

Helen Goodman: That is true as well. I was going to go on to say what, more positively, we would like to see. We would like to see free elections. We support the position of the Lima group of neighbouring countries, and we want to see dialogue between the parties who are in conflict in the country.

Sir Hugo Swire: On the Lima group, what pressure does the hon. Lady think that we can all bring to bear on Mexico? President Obrador has, very regretfully, withdrawn from the Lima group. We have invested a lot in relations with Mexico and we have good relations with it, but he really must come back and play a leading role in the Lima group.

Helen Goodman: It would not be helpful to go along with American calls for, or the suggestion that there might be, military intervention. I suspect, although I do not know because I have not discussed this with the Mexican embassy, that Mexico was reacting adversely to the hints that were being given by the American Government in the last few weeks.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister specifically on the sanctions, but he might need to write to me, because I think that the way in which the debate works means that he does not get another go at the Dispatch Box. May I seek your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker? Does the Minister get another opportunity to speak in this debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Sure. If we have time, we will allow him to come back—of course we will—but it is in your hands as well.

Helen Goodman: I am very grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

First, why was £80,000-worth of weapons material, which could be used for internal repression, authorised by the Government in 2016-17? That seems to be a breach of the current sanctions regime. *[Interruption.]* To Venezuela. Secondly, we do not believe that the oil sanctions that have been imposed by the Americans have been helpful in the current situation. This is precisely the point that hon. Members made earlier: the object of the sanctions should be to punish the politicians who are in charge of creating a bad situation and not the whole population.

I also want to ask the Minister about the gold that the Bank of England holds for the central bank of Venezuela. It was reported in November last year, before the Government had recognised Juan Guaidó as the leader of Venezuela, that the Bank of England had frozen 1,125 gold bars. I asked Her Majesty's Treasury through a written parliamentary question what the legal basis for that was. It told me that it was a matter for the Bank of England, so I wrote to the Governor to ask what the legal basis for the decision was and his response was somewhat opaque. I have read suggestions in the press that the American Government put pressure on the British Government, who leant on the Bank of England directly not to release these gold bars when the bank of Venezuela requested them. I would like to know from the Minister whether that is true.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, because this deserves an immediate answer. The Foreign Office has not at any stage put any such pressure on the Bank of England. Any decision about whether or not to transfer gold that it holds is entirely a matter for the Bank of England, and it does so without political pressure from us.

Helen Goodman: I am interested to hear the Minister's response, because if the Government wish to tighten the sanctions regime, he and the Foreign Office will have the opportunity to do so, and they might well succeed in that. However, what is not acceptable is pursuing a tighter policy without a clear legal base; I suggest that that would not do much for our reputation.

I want to pick up on the point that was made about Iran by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). EU sanctions were introduced in the case of Iran in 2011, in response to violent crackdowns against street protests. In view of the continued serious human rights abuses in Iran—notably, extensive use of the death penalty, including for juveniles; torture; the repression of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender activists; and the detention of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe three years ago and the denial to her of access to medical treatment—we believe that these sanctions are justified. They cover in particular goods and technology used for repression, and we believe that that is right.

However, we believe that the American decision to lift the trade sanctions against Iran, which was taken as part of the international community's joint comprehensive plan of action—JCPOA—nuclear deal, was also right. Sanctions have been an effective tool and they will continue to be effective if we impose them when things go badly and lift them when things go better. The Trump Administration's decision to reimpose those trade

sanctions and to withdraw from the JCPOA is mistaken. The JCPOA does not cover ballistic missiles or regional aggression—the arguments the Trump Administration put forward for reimposing sanctions. The decision further destabilises the region. That is a problem in foreign policy terms—it is unhelpful.

I would also be interested to know what the Government have done about the impact on European and British businesses and banks. Our businesses and banks are in an extremely difficult situation, whereby trade and investment under European law is completely legal, but under American law is completely illegal. There is an extraterritoriality effect of American law. I therefore have two questions for the Minister. First, will he hold to the current position in a post-Brexit scenario and not shift to the American position? Secondly, what has been, is and will be Government action to support British businesses and banks that wish to trade with and invest in Iran?

Finally, I come to Guinea-Bissau. The European Union imposed sanctions, which cover 20 individuals, in 2012 following an attempted coup. Guinea-Bissau is an extremely poor country with a lot of cocaine trafficked through it. There were some elections in March, and I ask the Minister what the Government are doing to improve governance in Guinea-Bissau. What are they doing to reduce drug trafficking via Guinea-Bissau? Does the Minister anticipate the UN Security Council changing its posture on sanctions?

John Redwood: The hon. Lady has made a powerful case about the things we are trying to put right in the countries we are discussing through sanctions, but it is worrying that they have been in place for a long time and not a lot of favourable change has occurred. Does she see any way of strengthening what we do once we have our own policy? We all share the aim of trying to improve Venezuela and Iran.

Helen Goodman: That was going to be my concluding point.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The hon. Lady made the point about extraterritoriality, but the UK Government, at the same time as introducing the statutory instruments, are rolling over the EC blocking regulation into UK legislation to stop UK citizens being subject to US extraterritoriality. I think that that is sensible, notwithstanding my worries about where they might go in future. May I check, given what the hon. Lady said, what Labour's position is? Does the Labour party believe that tying the statutory instruments with rolling over the blocking regulation makes sense, or would it do something different?

Helen Goodman: There was a lot of conversation about having some euro vehicles to facilitate trade and investment from Britain and the other European countries and I do not quite know why that has run into the sand. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us.

Let me come back to the general question that the right hon. Member for Wokingham raised, because it is important. On the one hand, everybody can have their idea of the perfect sanctions regime to get the particular policy objective they want. The problem with that lone ranger approach is that shared regimes are needed for sanctions to be effective. The statutory instruments

cover sanctions that were introduced at European level. The European Union is a large, significant group of countries that can have a significant impact when it imposes sanctions. Separately from that, we have legal obligations to impose any sanctions that are agreed at UN level. Because of the difficulty of doing anything that works, I want to know from the Minister how he intends to co-ordinate and co-operate in a post-Brexit world.

From the perspective of British business, there is already an awkwardness if the European regimes are not absolutely in line with the American regime, and a proliferation of different legal regimes would cause significant problems for British banks and businesses. I therefore personally do not believe that that is the right route to follow, so I come back to a question that I asked the Minister during the passage of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. If he would like to intervene again, will he explain to the House how the Government intend to co-ordinate and co-operate with other European countries on sanctions policy post Brexit?

2.56 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, including attendance at the annual Iran Freedom rally in Paris. I speak in support of the statutory instrument to carry over the Iran sanctions regime. I urge hon. Members to support it to enable those sanctions to remain in place.

Sadly, abuse of human rights has been prevalent in Iran for many years. I was deeply saddened to learn that one of my constituents lost his wife in the mass killings that took place in 1988. Iran still has one of the worst human rights records in the world. As we have heard, it executes more people than almost any other country and it is estimated that as many as 273 people were executed in 2018. Despite vocal international condemnation, Iran continues to execute children.

Press freedom is heavily constrained in Iran and many journalists and bloggers have been jailed. Reporters without Borders described the country as "the Middle East's biggest prison for journalists."

Gay men face the death penalty and there was widespread revulsion in the international community when a gay teenager, Hassan Afshar, was executed in August 2016.

Women routinely face sanctions if they fail to observe Iran's compulsory dress code. Married women cannot travel abroad without their husband's permission, their rights in relation to divorce are heavily limited, and they can be sentenced to death by stoning.

Religious minorities such as Christians, Baha'is, Jews and Sunni Muslims are subject to discrimination and significant constraints on their ability to practise their faith. For example, many members of the Baha'i faith have been subject to unwarranted arrest and imprisonment.

President Rouhani was hailed as a moderate when he was elected, but I am afraid that the human rights situation has worsened under his leadership. At least 30 people were killed and more than 4,900 arrested in protests between December 2017 and January 2018. Those demonstrations illustrate the discontent many feel about the regime and the frustrations about the severe economic hardship that many are suffering. I note the work of the National Council for Resistance of Iran in making the case for democracy, freedom and reform.

[Theresa Villiers]

It is not just at home that Iran's theocratic regime does great harm. Its malign involvement in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Gaza is a cause for grave concern. The United States Vice-President, Mike Pence, described Iran as

"the single biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world".

It has engaged in a massive arms build-up in Syria and Lebanon, where it is stockpiling thousands of missiles. Hezbollah's arsenal of short and medium-range rockets supplied by Iran is now estimated at 150,000, and there are believed to be more than 10,000 Iran-linked militia fighters in Syria. In Gaza, the terror group Hamas has boasted about the support that it receives from Iran. The regime continues to help al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Iran is believed to be responsible for multiple cyber-attacks on UK institutions, including what was described as a brute force attack on this Parliament.

I hope that the House will note the decision by the US Administration a few days ago to designate Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation. A Government spokesman in Washington explained that the step had been taken because the IRGC

"actively participates in, finances and promotes terrorism as a tool of statecraft."

Mark Pritchard: My right hon. Friend has rightly outlined the malevolent influence of Iran across the world, including Europe. Does she agree that Iran must stop exporting terror to European capitals such as Vienna, Paris and Tirana, among many others? If it were not for the security services of the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union and the Israelis, many other people would have sadly died.

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend, who is very well informed about these matters, makes an entirely valid point about the involvement of Iran in terror plots in this country and the rest of Europe. We should never even think of loosening the sanctions regime unless we have real clarity and certainty that that will come to an end.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): In her powerful speech, my right hon. Friend referred to the nefarious activities of Iran throughout the middle east. There have also been allegations that it has been meddling in Bahrain's internal affairs.

Theresa Villiers: That is a serious problem. Iran is the single biggest threat to stability in the whole region, and it is concerning to hear from my hon. Friend that that extends to Bahrain as well.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I do not want to turn this into a geography lesson, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the part that Iran allegedly plays in sanctions-busting with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is also very concerning?

Theresa Villiers: My right hon. Friend makes an important point that further strengthens the case for supporting the continued imposition of sanctions on this brutal regime.

The IRGC and its notorious al-Quds force are responsible for multiple human rights abuses both in and outside Iran.

I hope that our Government will consider following the example set by Washington and list the IRGC as a terrorist organisation.

I believe that there is the strongest of cases for retaining the sanctions regime against the Government of Iran. There is arguably a case for making it tougher, and reversing some of the changes that were made to relax the regime after the nuclear deal was agreed. The regime of the mullahs in Iran is responsible for horrific human rights abuses, it is a major sponsor of terrorism, and its involvement in conflicts around the middle east and beyond, as we have heard, make it the biggest single cause of regional instability. It is an evil regime.

I hope very much that one day we will see reform and change in Iran, so that the people there can live in freedom and democracy in a society based on equality and respect for their human rights. I commend the motion to the House.

3.3 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I support all the motions, because it is important that the sanctions that have been in place through the good offices of the European Union continue, at least in the immediate future. It would be a serious mistake for there to be seen to be any weakening of the United Kingdom's commitment to use its economic powers to encourage, persuade and, if need be, apply intense pressure to Governments overseas to comply with the simple, basic principles of human rights.

Obviously, we would much prefer these decisions to continue to be made in full partnership with the European Union. Even if we reach a stage when they are not, in practice it will be very difficult for the United Kingdom to depart significantly from the policies pursued by the EU. If we try to impose sanctions that it does not impose, all that will happen is that the trade will be displaced to the much bigger economic power that is the EU. It is clear that if we do not adopt sanctions that significantly depart from those applied by either the EU or any other major economic power, there will be a danger that we ourselves will be sanctioned, having been accused of sanctions-busting. Notwithstanding the triumphalism about the fact that we can now have our own independent sanctions regime, the reality is that sanctions regimes must be co-ordinated by a wide range of countries and economic entities, because otherwise they simply will not work.

Before I deal with the specifics, let me say that the general principle that we would adopt is that sanctions should be targeted at the cause of the problem, and not at the victims. They should be targeted at senior figures in Governments, in the military and in corrupt businesses. People who are making money out of human rights abuses should find it extremely difficult to gain the benefits of that money. We therefore support the principles of asset-freezing, travel bans and bans from participating in contracts with UK businesses. We should target sanctions at those who cause the problems, while, as far as possible, trying to avoid making the plight of people in these countries even worse than it already is.

Let me deal first with Burma/Myanmar. There has clearly been an extremely disappointing change from what we all expected. During those heady days when Aung San Suu Kyi was released from prison, it looked as if the country would be able to retake its place as a

democratic society, but since then it has all gone horribly wrong. In particular, the persecution of the Rohingya makes it clear that significant groups in Myanmar's population are simply not recognised as citizens, and denial of citizenship effectively means denial of humanity. I know that I am not the only one who was seriously disappointed by the President's complete failure to take any action, and her apparent inability, or unwillingness, to clamp down on what has properly been described as a genocide committed by her armed forces against her own people.

In Venezuela, we are also seeing a serious and worrying deterioration in standards of democracy, and the unwillingness of the rulers—whether recognised or not—to uphold the rule of law and principles of human rights. We support the fact that the sanctions will target arms sales as well as individuals who are known to be personally responsible for the most serious violations of human rights. However, we cannot support the heavy-handed United States-style sanctions which appear to have been designed to punish people simply for being Venezuelans. I find it hard to avoid the suspicion that they are Trump's revenge on the people of Venezuela for exercising their democratic right to choose a Government who happen to be openly critical of the United States. It is important for us to recognise the rights of people in other countries to choose their own Governments, even if we disagree with them.

It must be said that it has not been among the finest moments of this Government when Members have openly cheered with delight the news that people in Venezuela have been facing starvation, simply because that starvation has been caused by failed policies that could then be thrown back at the Leader of the Opposition. To make cheap political points out of human misery—

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Can the hon. Gentleman give an example of anyone in this House “cheering with delight” when people in Venezuela are starving? Let him give me one example. That was an outrageous comment.

Peter Grant: I shall be happy to get back to the hon. Gentleman, but if he is saying that there has never been a time when a Conservative Front Bencher has made fun of the Leader of the Opposition for the failure of the Chávez economic project and been met by cheers from Conservative Members, all that he needs to do is check the record. I am happy to do it for him if he cannot be bothered to do it himself.

Mark Pritchard: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. An accusation—a very serious accusation—has been made by the hon. Gentleman about the Government Front Bench, and, indeed, about Conservative Back Benchers: that we have gloated at the suffering of the people of Venezuela. If he is going to make such a statement—an outrageous statement—he should at least back it up with evidence, or withdraw it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think that the hon. Gentleman has made the point that he wished to make.

Peter Grant *rose*—

Sir Alan Duncan: I refer the hon. Gentleman, courteously but firmly, to the speech I made at Chatham House outlining what I believe to have been the real reasons

over the past 30 years for the collapse of the Venezuelan economy. It was an attempt to be as impartial and intellectual as possible. I think that he should withdraw the suggestion that we have no concern for the people of Venezuela, as that is what motivates our entire policy, which I am pleased to say is very much a cross-party policy, and it is one that he should support rather than criticise.

Peter Grant: I stand absolutely by my statement that there have been occasions in this House when Members on the Government Benches have used the failure of the economic policies of the Chávez Government as a direct jibe against the Leader of the Opposition, and those comments have been welcomed on the Conservative Benches. [*Interruption.*] I will now move on.

Sir Hugo Swire: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman may well wish to move on, but he has just changed what he originally said. Can you inform the House how we can stop the Scottish National party making these wild accusations and get the hon. Gentleman either to substantiate his wild claims or to apologise to the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has put forward his view and corrected the statement. The fact is that it is up to the hon. Gentleman to decide whether to withdraw the comment; he has chosen not to and he wishes to carry on.

Peter Grant: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will move on to the plight of Guinea-Bissau, which we have heard described as one of the world's poorest countries. It is not actually a poor country. If we look at the value of drugs trafficked through that country each year, we see that the GDP per person is massive. Unfortunately, that money comes from a trade that causes havoc and distress everywhere else. Guinea-Bissau is ranked 178th out of 188 countries according to the UN human development scale, making it one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. The average male life expectancy is now just 47 years, in a country that was once seen as a beacon for the future of African development. It has been beset by attempted military coup after attempted military coup; almost no Head of Government has held office for more than a few years before being removed, sometimes forcibly.

The European Union, with the United Kingdom's support, has made strenuous and sustained attempts to help Guinea-Bissau sort out its economic and governance problems, but all too often those efforts have had to be abandoned because it was simply not possible to ensure that aid was going to the correct people and places, because governance had collapsed to such a degree. That is particularly tragic for a country that is already one of the poorest in the world. It is impossible to apply sanctions that do not have some knock-on effect on citizens, but we have to support the imposition and continuation of those sanctions. The sanctions themselves are not enough. They are a necessary part of what has to be a much more concerted and ongoing attempt to give the 2 million people living in Guinea-Bissau at least a decent standard of living. In the 21st century, we do not want to see life expectancy continue to be just 47 years.

[Peter Grant]

I fully support many of the comments that have been made about Iran. Not that long ago, there seemed to be grounds for optimism. It looked as though that country was moving towards greater openness and democracy, with participation by all citizens, but over the past few years the situation has gone backwards very severely indeed. Iran has now gone back to the old days on human rights abuses, some of which have just been catalogued for us. We know of the desperate plight of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has now been in prison in Iran for a number of years, and her treatment there has been utterly shocking. We can only guess at the plight of who knows how many other Iranian citizens who do not have Members of Parliament or Government Ministers, either here or elsewhere, to speak on their behalf. It is worth remembering, however, that until the 1970s Iran had a brutal dictator with whom the United Kingdom was quite happy to trade.

I want to finish by saying that although we support the use of economic sanctions in these countries, there are other countries with similarly appalling human rights records but for which to date there has been no suggestion that sanctions will be applied. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) can chunter away from a sedentary position, but I am not making a party political point, because this has been a characteristic of successive Governments of all parties. Saudi Arabia has the death penalty for homosexuality, yet the United Kingdom trades arms with that country. Israel, according to the UK Government, is in breach of international law, yet there is no proposal for sanctions against the Government of Israel.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. These other countries are not part of the debate. I have allowed the debate to be opened up a little, but I cannot allow us to go on a world tour.

Peter Grant: I conclude simply by saying that we support the continued imposition of economic sanctions against those countries that would oppress their citizens and deny basic human rights to the citizens of Myanmar, Venezuela, Guinea-Bissau and Iran. We would also like to see the UK Government applying similar sanctions and restrictions on those who oppress their citizens in other countries with which the United Kingdom seems quite happy to trade arms by the billion.

3.15 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I rise to support the Government's statutory instrument on sanctions on Venezuela. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Latin America, and as the Prime Minister's trade envoy for a number of countries, including Colombia, I have seen at first hand the brutality and human rights abuses that the Maduro regime has inflicted on its own citizens. Some 3.6 million of them have now fled, largely to Colombia, Peru, Chile and Argentina. I have visited all those countries over the past 12 months and seen at first hand people living in abject poverty.

I take real exception to the claim made by the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) that Conservative Members have in some way celebrated the misery of the Venezuelan people and the human rights abuses taking

place in that country, which is a grotesque and untrue allegation. It is grotesque and untrue because Members on the Government side of the House know the need for this sanctions regime—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the point has been made, but we need to get back to the debate. A very good point has been hammered home, but we now need to move on.

Mark Menzies: Let us move on with the need for sanctions against Venezuela. That regime has not entered hardship as a result of the oil price collapse; it has entered hardship because, not just under Maduro but under Chávez—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) shakes her head, as though it is all down to the oil price collapse. It is not; it is down to the fact that Maduro and Chávez played fast and loose with the constitution. They both abused their positions in order to suppress opposition, including within the press. To suggest that all this misery has been brought about by the oil price collapse is to be economical with the actualité.

Mike Gapes: Is it not a fact that the richest person in Venezuela is the daughter of former President Hugo Chávez, a billionaire with about \$4 billion US dollars, which has been systematically stolen from the people by this so-called socialist regime?

Mark Menzies: The hon. Gentleman is 100% on the money. That is the inconvenient truth that many Opposition Members fail to recognise, because massive abuses were committed well before the collapse in the oil price, and it is one of the reasons why sanctions are needed.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In support of my hon. Friend's case, has he noticed that this is shown not just in the oil price, but in the volume of oil produced, because they so trashed their industry and failed to invest in it that it now produces a fraction of its potential capacity? That is why Venezuela is so poor.

Mark Menzies: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Not only has the volume of oil produced collapsed, but many of the oil workers who would have produced the oil have fled the regime. Their families are living in absolute penury as a result of years of neglect and economic mismanagement. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) was quite right to point out the extreme wealth that is being accumulated corruptly by members of the Chávez and Maduro regimes and by the military. Much of that money is offshored, including vast amounts in Spain. This is not a new phenomenon: for many years, the property market in some areas of Madrid was red hot with money that was flowing out of Venezuela and being used to buy office blocks and residential properties galore in order to cleanse the money out of Venezuela.

Any robust sanctions regime should not only ensure that money is prevented from leaving the country now but take into account the money that has been leaving for years, including at massive rates under Chávez. [Interruption.] That is clearly uncomfortable for the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland, but that money was stolen from the people of Venezuela and it needs to be taken back in as part of any sanctions regime.

[*Interruption.*] If we are talking about laughter, we have seen great amount of laughter from the hon. Lady. This is either something she finds funny or something that she fails to understand.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Following the intervention the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), a fact that I find most harrowing is that aid lorries are now being turned away from the Venezuelan border because the Government are worried that they will lose their grip. That and the point he made exactly define an absence of humanity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just remind the House that we have quite a lot of other speakers?

Mark Menzies: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hear your guidance and I know that there is much pressure on our time.

I encourage the Government to enact this statutory instrument on sanctions for Venezuela and to ensure that, while we are still a member of the EU and while we have reach through the United Nations, we ensure that the sanctions regime targets those in the military and the senior members of the Maduro and Chávez regimes who have stolen billions from Venezuela, in order to get that money back to the people where it belongs.

Sir Hugo Swire: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does in Latin America. Does he agree that Petrocaribe provided another way for Venezuela to launder its money and that it caused absolute mayhem in many vulnerable countries of the Caribbean?

Mark Menzies: Absolutely. That point stands well on its own.

This should be an opportunity for the House to come together and send a message of solidarity to Juan Guaidó and the democratically elected members of the Congress, which Maduro has now sought to supersede with his own puppet arrangements. The suffering in Venezuela is something that no one should ever have to experience, and any sanctions must be clearly targeted on the instigators of this corrupt regime.

3.22 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The main issue that we are considering this afternoon is what our independent system of sanctions will be like if and when we leave the European Union. That is the key point. I must confess that I am somewhat sceptical about the value of having an independent sanctions regime, because the whole point of sanctions is that when we work in concert with our closest allies, we are far more likely to achieve success than if we simply try to go it alone. This is nowhere writ more large than in relation to Russia.

For many years, individual countries of the European Union resisted adopting a shared sanctions regime in relation to Russia because some countries wanted to continue to take gas and oil from Russia, some wanted a strong political relationship with it, and Mr Berlusconi in Italy wanted to go to parties with President Putin. It was difficult for us to achieve a shared sanctions regime in relation to Russia. Indeed, it was only when Russia started using gas and oil as a means of oppressing

Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia that the European Union decided to act in concert. The UK then went to European Council meetings where Prime Minister Cameron and then our present Prime Minister repeatedly said, "It's been great, we've been able to persuade the European Union to adopt the sanctions that we wanted." As a united body in Europe, we have been able to achieve far more than the United Kingdom will be able to if we go it alone.

I welcome the Minister's comments that in the future we will, in the main, adopt the same kind of measures that the European Union adopts. My anxiety is that it might be difficult for us outside the European Union, unless there is some manner of working with the EU, to persuade it to adopt the kind of sanctions regime that we are interested in.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. It is always worth hearing him on these subjects. I would simply point out that it is not all sweetness and light. For example, the Germans' behaviour over Nord Stream 2 is going to break the whole sanctions regime, yet nothing seems to happen from the Commission.

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman has virtually stolen the words out of my mouth. He is absolutely right, but my anxiety is that when we are no longer in that room, it is going to be much more difficult for the UK to secure the outcome that we want in relation to Nord Stream 2. I hope that the Government will manage to find some means of establishing a strong relationship with the European Union in that regard.

I also worry about the Magnitsky process. I hear what the Minister is saying, but I have heard two Ministers speak on this subject since the House unanimously passed measures that the Government did not really want to include in the legislation—[*Interruption.*] I know that the Minister put them in in the end, but I am not sure that he was the most enthusiastic Member to adopt them. He can puff out his chest as much as he wants, but he is still not going to persuade me that he was quite there with the rest of us. The point is that we still do not have those measures in place. As he has referred to the Magnitsky process, I hope that we will now manage to sort this out very quickly, not least because Bill Browder has today been told that the Russians intend to press a seventh charge with Interpol—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I did say that we could open the envelope, but I did not mean that we had to open every page of what was inside. Today's debate is not about Russia. I have allowed a little bit of movement, but we need to get a lot more speakers in.

Chris Bryant: You are quite right, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am very close to finishing.

In making my last point, about Venezuela, I want to defend my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). The hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) and I agree on nearly every aspect of our relationship with many different countries in Latin America, including Venezuela. That country is perpetuating poverty for its people and its politicians have completely let the people down. They are also risking civil war and war across the whole Andean region, which is dangerous.

[Chris Bryant]

However, in all honesty, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland was agreeing with the hon. Gentleman, not disagreeing with him, so I very much hope that they will kiss and make up later. With that, I shall finish.

3.27 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I shall be brief, and I shall not take interventions, because others wish to speak. It is disappointing that these orders do not have this week's date on them. We have let the public down once over leaving the EU on 29 March, and we should be leaving this week. I am grateful that planning is still going on for us to leave, and the sooner the better.

I want us to have a more ambitious foreign policy once we are an independent country again. There is a huge opportunity here for us to do good in the world by promoting the right kind of sanctions policy. I agree with all those colleagues who say that sanctions are more effective if we get more countries to buy into them. There are a number of areas, most notably Iran, where our US ally is very much at variance with our European allies, and that is surely where the United Kingdom—by adopting a distinctive approach and perhaps working more directly through the United Nations, freed of the constraint of belonging to one side in the two-sided row—could make a direct contribution, influence the world for the better and create a more united sanctions regime.

There are those who are very worried about sanctions targeting the wrong people. Of course it is best to target the guilty men and women at the top of evil regimes, but we need to recognise that they need access to hard currency. It is often by exploiting commodities or other hard currency generators in their economies that they perpetuate their evil and buy the things we do not want to sell them from others around the world who will. It is not easy to target just a limited number of people, so we have to find our way through.

I hope we can do that with Venezuela, where we need to back all the initiatives to try to get food and other aid in and to support the forces for democracy. Above all, we need to work with the opposition in Venezuela to show how they could restore their economy with the colossal oil wealth that is there beneath their feet but is deliberately not exploited by the evil incompetents of the regime. Let us have our own policy, and let us get on with it.

3.29 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): This debate is probably unnecessary, because we have not yet left the European Union and we almost certainly will not leave with no deal if we do leave, so many of the things we are debating will be dealt with over a long period in transitional arrangements, or not at all. However, given that the House is spending a great deal of time at the moment debating things that are not about to happen, that is par for the course.

In January, I asked an urgent question about Venezuela and there was extensive discussion. The situation has got worse since then. There are now serious threats to Juan Guaidó, the president of the National Assembly and the person who is recognised by many countries and Governments, including our own, as the legitimate leader of Venezuela.

I was pleased that the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), used the phrase, "We welcome this sanctions proposal." I hope she was referring not just to "we" in general but specifically to the shadow Justice Secretary, the shadow Home Secretary, the shadow International Development Secretary—he sits alongside her—the Leader of the Opposition and all those who have been apologists for or supporters of the Chávez and Maduro regimes. I hope she was referring to members of the Venezuela solidarity campaign, members of the Stop the War Coalition and all those organising rallies and events today to say, "Hands off Venezuela." I hope she was referring to all those who are acting in this country to undermine the sanctions regime and the action being taken by the Bank of England and others against the corrupt, kleptocratic regime in that country. I praise her for what she said—I have no disagreement with her at all—but I hope she was speaking for everybody on the Labour Benches in that respect.

We need to discuss the wider question of the impact of sanctions. What is the purpose of sanctions? Is it to change the behaviour of a regime or to bring about some kind of punishment for bad people? Punishing bad people is a good idea, but a better idea is to change the behaviour of the regime so the people in the country benefit. We know from history that sanctions regimes are often not successful in changing Governments' behaviour.

It could be argued that the Iranian regime has changed its behaviour and signed up to the JCPOA in respect of its nuclear programme because of the sanctions imposed on it, and that is at least partially true. However, a bigger reason for that change in behaviour might be that the regime has adopted a long-term view and, thinking 10, 15 or 20 years ahead, wants to take the heat off now while secretly doing what it did in the past with covert facilities at Qom and various other programmes to get around those international sanctions.

Joan Ryan: Does my hon. Friend agree that Iran's desire to wipe out the state of Israel is based on an ideological hatred? Iran and Israel are a thousand miles apart. They have no regional material competition, nor does Israel have any significant effect on the lives of Iranian citizens. In the long term, sanctions against an ideological regime are unlikely to succeed.

Mike Gapes: Iran was sanctioned not for its generalised foreign policy, or for its abuse of human rights internally, or for the terrible things it has done to support the murderous Assad regime in Syria, or for what it has done in respect of the situation in Lebanon, or for what it is doing to support the Houthis in Yemen, or for its hostility to and visceral hatred of the idea of self-determination for the Jewish people and the state of Israel, but for its nuclear programme. There may be arguments for extending sanctions on Iran, but we have to recognise that, so far, this is about the current sanctions regime.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is right that successive British Governments have played an important role when other Governments wobbled, or when other Governments, such as the Hungarian Orbán Government or the Italian Government—he mentioned Berlusconi, but the current Salvini Government

are doing the same thing—have been complicit in being friendly to the aspirations of Putin in weakening sanctions regimes. We have stood firm, and we, France and a few others have led the way on tough sanctions.

Sometimes our EU partners have been divided and we have tipped the scales towards a more robust regime. If we are outside the European Union, that EU regime is likely to be weaker than it would otherwise have been. We would also find ourselves facing all the economic problems that come from being outside the EU, and we would be susceptible to pressure from other countries to go soft on sanctions because we would not have the collective weight of the European Union behind us.

3.35 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I want to let the Minister wind up, so this is a perfect time for you to come back into the Chamber, Mr Speaker, and for me to talk about Burma for just one minute, because I know it is dear to your heart.

We are obviously still concerned about oppression in Rakhine, Karen, Shan and all the other ethnic states. Everyone welcomes the ceasefires called by the military since last year, but there are still concerns that those ceasefires allow the military to build up its defences and militarise areas of those ethnic states.

In my role as trade envoy, I am only too aware that there is a holistic approach. I am glad the Minister talked about targeted sanctions, because for the ordinary people who are being oppressed, persecuted, raped, mutilated and killed, we know that the only way through this, apart from our action with the international community, is through growth and prosperity. We must give them that growth and prosperity through trade, support and infrastructure building, which is why we need to target the sanctions at the military. Let us make sure that we do not leave the ordinary people of Burma behind in a fuller set of sanctions.

3.37 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I am vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Venezuela.

If we ever manage to leave the EU, one benefit will be greater flexibility on our application of sanctions to countries acting outside the law and actively persecuting their own people, such as Maduro's Venezuela. We already have some flexibility, but the UK will have much more if we leave the EU properly, although we will still be able to choose to align with the EU when it is not held back by the particular concerns of one or two member states.

Beyond the statutory instrument, one direct action the UK could take right now to demonstrate its determination to tackle the massive theft of funds from Venezuela by corrupt Chavistas would be to declare Maduro's ambassador to the United Kingdom persona non grata on account of the arrest warrant issued against her by the state of Andorra for the theft of \$4 million. The details of the case are well known to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, not least through me, and have appeared in *El País* as well as in official documents.

The suffering of the Venezuelan people is immense, and my words can hardly do it justice. We have heard others capably underline the shame of the very senior

leadership of the Labour party and its active support for the Maduro regime, including entertaining its mouthpieces on our soil.

I know Venezuela is not a Foreign Office priority, but the Government need to do more to help bring democracy back to that wonderful country, and the statutory instrument is a step in the right direction. I welcome recent comments by the Minister in that direction, but I think more can be done. Action towards the ambassador would also help.

3.38 pm

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions, which spread quite widely but show the passions raised by this topic.

I take my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) to task for saying that Venezuela is not a Foreign Office priority, which I find difficult to swallow, to put it politely, when it is very much a priority. I went to the United Nations Security Council, at a few hours' notice, for an emergency debate, and I went to the Ottawa meeting of the Lima group. I spoke yesterday at the meeting of European Foreign Ministers, and I have given a considered lecture on Venezuela at Chatham House. So I would politely ask him to revise his view of where he thinks our priorities sit.

On the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), the IRGC is already sanctioned by the EU, but it comes under the EU's Iran nuclear sanctions, rather than the ones that we are discussing today. When it comes to giving notice of who we might include in any EU sanctions that are transferred—

Mr Speaker: Stick to 3.40 pm and you will be all right.

Sir Alan Duncan: Very good.

We will do that at the eleventh hour, as it were, to avoid asset flight by not giving prior notice to those who might be affected. As I said, the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 enables sanctions to be imposed for a variety of purposes, including responding to or deterring gross violations of human rights, or otherwise promoting compliance with human rights law or respect for human rights. After we transpose existing EU sanctions regimes into UK law—that must be the first priority—the UK will continue to take action against human rights violators and abusers. There is already a strong human rights element in all our sanctions. [*Interruption.*] Do I take it, Mr Speaker, that you are urging me to speed up?

Mr Speaker: Yes.

Sir Alan Duncan: In which case, having covered so much already, I commend these regulations to the House.

3.40 pm

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Speaker put the Question (Standing Order No. 16(1)).

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Burma (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 136), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

SANCTIONS

Resolved,

That the Venezuela (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 135), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.—(*Sir Alan Duncan.*)

SANCTIONS

Resolved,

That the Iran (Sanctions) (Human Rights) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 134), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.—(*Sir Alan Duncan.*)

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
(SANCTIONS)

Resolved,

That the Republic of Guinea-Bissau (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations (S.I., 2019, No. 554), which were laid before this House on 15 March, be approved.—(*Sir Alan Duncan.*)

Section 1 of the European Union
(Withdrawal) Act 2019

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have not selected either of the amendments.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Shocking!

Mr Speaker: Well, it is essentially a negating, but the hon. Gentleman can expatiate on the matter if he is successful in catching my eye. It is always a pleasure to call Mr Peter Bone. To move the motion, I call the Minister—the Solicitor General, no less.

3.42 pm

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I beg to move,

That this House agrees for the purposes of section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019 to the Prime Minister seeking an extension of the period specified in Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union to a period ending on 30 June 2019.

I will endeavour to be brief in my remarks. I will, of course, take interventions, but please allow me to make three points by way of introduction. First, the Government did not want to be in this position. I do not say that in the spirit of seeking to attribute blame to people, but in a moment of solemn reflection it is important that we acknowledge where we find ourselves.

It is of great disappointment to me and many others that this House has not felt able to approve the withdrawal agreement. The Prime Minister said last week that any plan for the future must include the withdrawal agreement. It is what we negotiated with the EU, and it remains the Government's position that leaving with a deal is the best way for this country to leave the EU. Although I understand that certain right hon. and hon. Members have not found themselves in a position to support the withdrawal agreement, if we are to leave the EU in a smooth and orderly manner, we must find a way to find a plan for the way forward that includes it. Furthermore, the Government have already been clear that we are seeking an extension. As such, we continue to be of the view that the Bill passed last night was, with respect to its movers, unnecessary.

Secondly, it is clear that the House is not willing to leave without a deal. Thirdly, nobody who respects the outcome of the referendum could wish the UK to participate in the European Parliament elections, nearly three years after our country voted to leave the institutions of the European Union. However, if the UK remains a member state on 23 May, that is what it will be legally required to do. That is because the EU treaties provide that European Union citizens have the right to be represented in the European Parliament, and that the European Parliament needs to be properly constituted, with duly elected MEPs from all member states, for it to perform its functions.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): When my hon. and learned Friend says that we need to have left by 23 May, that is the date the election actually takes place. Will he inform the House of the latest date possible for the returning officer to publish the notice of poll and start the process of those elections?

The Solicitor General: In the letter that was sent to colleagues in the names of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General, I think reference was made to the necessity of allowing a suitable time between the bringing into force of the order that allows the elections to proceed and the elections themselves. My recollection is that that is a 25-day period. However, I will say also say, with regard to the process, that, of course, the new European Parliament does not meet until early July, and therefore it is important for us to distinguish between the need to hold elections and the requirement for British MEPs to actually sit in the European Parliament, if we are indeed to leave the European Union before early July.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Solicitor General: I give way first to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I think the Solicitor General said earlier that what we have to do is find a way to find a plan to find a way forward. That sounds just a little bit nebulous, if he does not mind me saying so; it seems quite unlikely that that is going to be very concrete by 30 June. So if the European Council says, “Actually, we think you need to have an extension to the end of the year,” will the Government be open to that?

The Solicitor General: As the hon. Gentleman knows, negotiations will carry on in the Council tomorrow, and I think it would be idle speculation for me to try and anticipate what might be agreed. Some people take offence at the word nebulous; I do not. [*Interruption.*] I really do not. What I have tried to do, at all stages of this process, is to find a way forward and to seek a solution. It is in all our hands, and I say that in a spirit of friendship and co-operation to all hon. Members.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It seems to me that the Solicitor General is simply giving the House a reality check as to the position that we have been put into by Members who voted in various ways. But is not the situation in law that, although it might be necessary to participate in elections—which neither he nor I nor, I think, most of us want—as a matter of law, the outgoing European Parliament exists until the moment that the new Parliament is created, and therefore there are certain things that could take place, such as ratification of any agreement, until the point that the new Parliament meets; also, the argument that British presence might impugn the new Parliament would not exist if we have left by that time?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I think he is absolutely right about the way in which the European Parliament is constituted. It is due, I think, to rise on 18 April, but it does not cease to exist—it does not dissolve in the way that we do. That is important in terms of ratification, because section 13 of the withdrawal Act that we passed obviously includes that requirement as well.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I just want to clear up something that I heard my hon. and learned Friend say. I think I heard him say at the Dispatch Box that it was wholly feasible that the Government may actually end up fighting the

European elections, then only after that not allow its MEPs to take their seats—say they had been given an extension, but somehow we had managed to ratify the deal. Is that correct? Is it Government policy that we would go as far as to fight an election but not take our seats at the end of it?

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend is right to ask about that detail. I think that we are obliged, as a matter of law, to prepare for European elections, but if we have exited the European Union by the end of June, we are no longer a member but a third country. Therefore, the requirement to take our seats in the European Parliament would have ended.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Further to the point made by the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), will the Solicitor General give the House an assurance that, bearing in mind that postal votes will be cast before polling day, no one who casts a vote will find that the election in which they have cast that vote is cancelled after they have marked their cross on the piece of paper?

The Solicitor General: The ingenuity of the right hon. Gentleman knows no bounds. He is right to ask detailed questions such as that, but we have a solution to all these vexed questions: to agree a deal so that we can get on with leaving.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): That goes to the very heart of the issue. I have no objection to supporting this afternoon’s Government motion for extension, but I am mindful that we cannot go on lurching from one cliff-edge crisis to another. Unless the Government are able to craft a deal that commands a majority of this House, we must bear it in mind that 22 May or 30 June are not very far away. That concerns me. I would much prefer an opportunity, if necessary, for a longer and fungible extension, which enables us to make some decisions without the pressure we are under. Finally, with respect to the Bill passed through this House yesterday, I make the point that, like the nuclear deterrent, it works because we do not have to use it.

The Solicitor General: My right hon. and learned Friend tempts me on to a path of anticipating what might or might not be the outcome of the summit. I hear his point about the need to avoid regular cliff edges. He will forgive me if I remind him politely but firmly that there is an option for us all to take, which is to agree a way forward and an orderly exit.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the point made by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), I appreciate that the Solicitor General will not get into what might or might not be discussed at the European Council, and I appreciate his sincerity about wanting to get a deal agreed as soon as possible, but the reality is that many of us will support the motion conditional on our expectation that the Prime Minister will listen seriously and consider any longer options suggested, such as flexextension, fungible extension or whatever we want to call them. I ask for his assurance that the Prime Minister will listen carefully to any offers put forward by other European leaders.

The Solicitor General: I think it is axiomatic that the Prime Minister will indeed listen carefully to any constructive suggestions made by the Council and the Commission on such matters. That is what she has always done—she has borne the brunt of some criticism for doing so, but her painstaking approach is the right way to go.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is there little point to the British Government setting their red lines for the extension of the extension, because the decision on its length and the conditions attached will be made tomorrow by the European Council, with the British state outside the room?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to characterise the decision of the 27, but before that there will have been active and proper negotiation and discussion between the United Kingdom and the Council. The reality is that we can end all of this here, in this House, by coming to a sensible agreement and making those compromises that many of us have had to do, me very much included.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): In the event of a whole swathe of MEPs being elected but not taking their seats, will they be entitled to compensation? Will the Solicitor General assure us that that compensation will be paid for not by our constituents but by the EU?

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend makes an intriguing point. I will not get into any discussions about the question of liability. Everyone who might put themselves up as a candidate for that election would know the likely outcome.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Solicitor General talks about compromise, but he overlooks the fact that certainly most of us on the Opposition Benches voted for every single one of the four options before us last week; the problem was that most Conservative MPs and the Government did not vote for any of them.

The Solicitor General: Well, that did not include me.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My hon. and learned Friend is chopping about with various dates that he would prefer, and he keeps making the obvious point that article 50 can come to an end if and when we have support for a withdrawal agreement, which I have supported all the way through. Would not the best thing be to take some far distant date and give us a proper extension—saying, of course, that it will end forthwith, as soon as any withdrawal agreement is passed? I think that is being proposed in Brussels at the moment, and I cannot think of the slightest sensible reason against it. We cannot keep having these ridiculous cliff-edge debates, moving the date forward by a fortnight or a month every now and again.

The Solicitor General: My right hon. and learned Friend is right to talk about the need to avoid cliff edges. To that extent, I can agree that today we are seeking to create a situation whereby we will have the flexibility to leave if ratification takes place. That aspect of his intervention is a very important one to remember. The negotiability of the position is simply that the talks

between the parties are ongoing and if there is something fruitful as a result, we can proceed to use the provisions of section 13, with which all of us are notably very familiar. Those stages can then be passed and ratification will be deemed to be complete.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What advice would my hon. and learned Friend give me to pass on to council candidates for the forthcoming local elections? For two years, they have been telling constituents that we were leaving on 29 March; then it became 12 April. We now have a wipe-clean board in my office so we can fill in the current date that we are leaving. What should our candidates be telling people on the doorstep?

The Solicitor General: Just like my hon. Friend, I am an assiduous canvasser and I am having those conversations myself. The message that I would give to my constituents is that we are doing our part and trying our very best to resolve this situation, but we now need all elements—all Members of Parliament—to come together in a spirit of compromise, so that we can get on with the job that we were mandated to do.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Is not the point that whether the delay is two weeks, two months or two years, it is not time that is needed, but political will to come to a deal? People such as me have made compromises—there is much in the withdrawal agreement that I do not like—to move to a position to support the withdrawal agreement. Is it not about time that other Members of this House were willing to do the same?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes an extremely powerful point. I pay tribute to him and to all hon. and right hon. Members who were faced with a very difficult decision and took what I would regard as the statesman or stateswomanlike approach by deciding to support the withdrawal agreement. It was absolutely the right thing to do, and I pay warm tribute to each and every one of them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Solicitor General: Let me just make a little bit of progress, and then I will of course take more interventions.

Mr Speaker: There is only time for one or two more interventions because lots of people want to speak—move on.

The Solicitor General: I will obey your strictures and move on, Mr Speaker.

I turn to the question of what might happen with regards to the further extension. Before the House considers the motion, as the Prime Minister said last week, we should all be very clear what the extension would be for. It is all about ensuring that we leave the EU in a timely and orderly way, and that means leaving with a deal. That is why the Government have engaged in a constructive process with the Opposition to seek to agree a plan—either a unified position that could command the confidence of the House, or a series of options upon which it could decide. As we know, that process remains ongoing.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Six times now, the Solicitor General has said that the best way to move forward is to agree a deal and that, if we are to have a Brexit at all, that is self-evidently true. The problem is that we are not being offered a deal; we have been offered the deal—the Prime Minister’s deal. Is this not the time to concede that it is a bad deal socially and economically, and that that is the reason why the Government are in the position they are in?

The Solicitor General: With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, I disagree with his analysis about the deal. I did not note much opposition, certainly from certain corners of the House, to the detail of the withdrawal agreement. The focus of the debate has been on the nature of the future relationship and the declaration that accompanies the agreement. I therefore take issue with his characterisation of the current position.

It is our desire to pursue this process with expedition. Our intention is to secure the House’s assent to the deal and we have been clear, as I have just said, that that could include making changes to the political declaration. That would meet the necessary preconditions for ratification by 22 May, so that we could leave the EU without the need to hold European Parliament elections. While all sides recognise the urgency with which we need to make progress, given where we are and that it will be challenging, we cannot be certain that an extension until just 22 May would provide us with sufficient time.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Just to support what my hon. and learned Friend says, business says very clearly to us that the deal is good enough for it. Is he aware that the mini-extensions are really difficult, particularly for manufacturing? The car factories are shut down at the moment in anticipation of disruption. They cannot just open up and shut down on these cliff edges, so flexibility is essential.

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. As a Member of Parliament, she represents car manufacturing interests very proudly. I care very deeply indeed about the future of that important industry and will do everything I can to secure it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Solicitor General: I will not give way, because I need to move on and wrap up, as Mr Speaker said.

For the reasons I have given, we have sought an extension up to 30 June, which as I said earlier is before the new European Parliament will be constituted in early July.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): This is a point we have been debating among ourselves here. I gather that the European Parliament has already divvied up the seats, so to speak. What will happen if we take our seats and then do not take our seats? Surely what is being proposed will throw the whole thing into confusion.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right that the European Parliament has had to make contingency plans for constitution with the UK and without the UK, and there is no doubting the complications of that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Solicitor General: Tempted as I am to take further interventions from right hon. and hon. Members, I must finish.

I think most colleagues would agree that it would now be odd to leave on 22 May, when just a few additional weeks would allow for the finalisation of the ratification of a deal. I should explain why we cannot seek to extend only to 22 May and then ask for a further extension to 30 June. To put it simply, we must all recognise that we cannot assemble and reassemble the European Council every few weeks.

The Government have committed to deliver on the result of the referendum, and we in this House must now come together to find a way forward, rather than seeking to further extend the process. It is up to us to chart a course for this country beyond the EU and to agree a plan that can deliver what I hope and believe will be a bright future, with the close and meaningful partnership with the EU that we all want to see. That is what the Government’s extension will provide time for, and that is why I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to support it, to support the Prime Minister at tomorrow’s Council, and to support a plan that will deliver on the referendum and take the United Kingdom out of the European Union. I commend the motion to the House.

4.3 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The motion before us is a straightforward one. I note the Solicitor General’s remark that he did not want to be here, but the more pertinent point is that we should not have found ourselves here. When Parliament voted overwhelmingly to give the Prime Minister the authority to trigger article 50 and begin the negotiations, we never expected that we would be in this position two years later.

The Government should be mortified that they have been forced to ask once again for the House’s approval to seek an extension to the article 50 process, not only because the fact that another extension is required is a damning indictment of their mishandling of the negotiations and their failure to secure a deal that commands the confidence of the Commons, but because the very fact that we are being asked to approve the motion before us, pursuant to an unconventional Act of Parliament spearheaded by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and passed last week in the face of Government opposition, is testament to the serious erosion of trust between the Executive and this legislature. If right hon. and hon. Members are weary, it is first and foremost a weariness of the undeliverable promises made by this Government and the false expectations that have consistently been raised, whether it be the Brady amendment or the Malthouse compromise.

Even this morning, contrary to all the available evidence and the constancy of the EU position, the Leader of the House chose to give credence to the fantastical notion that the EU, at the same time as considering another extension request, might also entirely shift its position and agree to reopen the withdrawal agreement. It is long past time that Government Ministers stopped peddling myths to indulge the hardliners on their own Benches and advance their personal agendas.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be preferable to have a longer extension to get this right without cliff edges? Has he noticed that the European Research Group has been doing its best to stymie a long extension by threatening that the UK will cause havoc in EU institutions if there is one? Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to condemn absolutely that view and that method of working?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Conservative Members tell us that we have had no influence whatsoever throughout the duration of our membership but that if we stay in we will be able to exert influence in a way that is wholly irresponsible for the functioning of the Union.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): This is a genuine question. If Her Majesty's Opposition had tabled an amendment seeking a much longer extension, I think it would have won support, certainly from most of us sitting over in this quarter of the Chamber. Is there a reason why the Opposition did not table an amendment to get a long extension, which would do the job for manufacturers in particular?

Matthew Pennycook: The honest answer is that we all know that 30 June is not a particularly realistic proposition and that the Prime Minister was forced to propose that date more for reasons of party management. She has, in a sense, contracted out the decision to the EU. We would expect the Government to accept any reasonable extension that goes beyond 30 June, with the proviso that if this House approved and ratified a withdrawal agreement we would exit at that point.

Mr Bradshaw: Will my hon. Friend also take this opportunity to reassure our European partners, some of whom may feel nervous about granting or asking for a long extension because of the threats made by the ERG, that our own Prime Minister has finally stopped kowtowing to the ERG, so the European Union does not need to start kowtowing to it, too?

Matthew Pennycook: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. Events have clearly overtaken us since the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019 was first conceived, with the Prime Minister having already written to the President of the European Council indicating her intention to seek an extension until 30 June. As I have said, we wholeheartedly support the Government's efforts to secure one; indeed, that is vital if we are to avoid a disastrous no deal. We would expect the Government to agree to any reasonable extension beyond 30 June, and the Opposition would support accepting that proposition.

As we have argued consistently, however, any extension must be for a worthwhile purpose, and the length of the extension must flow from that purpose. The public will not forgive the Government if an extension is sought and agreed under the pretence of efforts to secure cross-party compromise, but for Ministers then to use the time secured in a vain attempt to find a way to force this House to accept the same flawed deal that has been voted down on three occasions.

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I will give way one final time, because I know that many Members wish to speak.

Mr Gyimah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making the right decision to give way. Is it not about time that we accepted that the strategy the Prime Minister has pursued up until now is a failed strategy, that there is no majority in this House for the deal, and that being pressured at the last minute to cobble something together that is divisive in the House is not the right approach either, given how irreversible and momentous the decision in front of us is? We should embrace the opportunity of a longer extension to pause and reflect and to get the right deal for our country.

Matthew Pennycook: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that this is a failed strategy. As I will come on to say, for any viable proposition to be accepted, there has to be real movement from the Government. It was on that basis that the Opposition agreed to substantive talks with the Government in the national interest.

As you will be aware, Sir, a further round of talks is taking place as we speak, and we will continue to engage with them in a constructive spirit. However, the talks will inevitably fail if the Government are not willing to countenance fundamental changes to their deal. It is futile and, frankly, patronising to right hon. and hon. Members across the House to be told that if we only understood the Government's deal properly, we would realise that the concerns we have expressed to this day are unwarranted.

If a stable majority is to coalesce around a single unified approach, it will require genuine compromise, as the Solicitor General said. It will also require honesty from the Government about where legitimate differences exist, how they might be bridged in an overhauled political declaration, and how this House would entrench any changes that might be agreed so that they cannot simply be ripped up by whichever of the expanding field of candidates eventually succeeds the Prime Minister, as well as about the requirement for seeking public approval for any agreement that might emerge at this late hour by means of a confirmatory referendum.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I am not going to give way again.

Finally, honesty is also required about the obligations that any extension beyond 22 May might entail. That includes being honest with ourselves and the public about participation in the European Parliament elections, abiding by a duty of sincere co-operation, and any other reasonable conditions that the EU might set. There is no question but that the House should approve the motion before us, so that we can secure the necessary extension to the article 50 process. We must then use that extension not to prolong the misery of recent months, but to recalibrate and to forge a different way forward.

4.11 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Greenwich

and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), some of whose points I actually agreed with. I will be brief because I know a large number of Members want to speak.

In simple terms, to get the message across, this is a bad motion spawned from a bad Bill. Going right back, I have said this many times, and Members of the House yawn and look tired at the fact—I am looking at the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn)—but 17.4 million voted. This is a constitutional first because the people went against the voice of the establishment. The Father of the House and others have long sat here believing in parliamentary democracy, but this time, for the first time in history, the people were given the right to decide very clearly and to the horror of the establishment—political, commercial and legal—they went against it.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman talks about what the people wanted, but were the people told in 2016 that they would be leaving the EU on 29 March 2019?

Mr Paterson: They were told that we would leave and take back control, and then, in the ensuing general election, the two main parties and the Democratic Unionist party confirmed that leave meant leaving the single market, leaving the customs union and leaving the remit of the European Court of Justice. That was confirmed by 498 and 494 Members on the Second and Third Readings of the withdrawal Bill triggering article 50, which triggered departure on 29 March.

Opposition Members just must understand the anger outside this House; and the frustration will turn into something that I would not like to quantify. People approach me the whole time and I get letters, emails and calls because it is very clear that this House, perhaps stunned by the immediate impact of the referendum, voted to trigger article 50 and has since done everything it can do to stymie it, culminating in the Bill that went through last night in ridiculous circumstances. The Second Reading went through by a majority of one, and it was then rammed through with hardly any procedures here.

Anna Soubry: I suggest to the right hon. Gentleman that insulting the majority of people in this House is not exactly a great way to win an argument. However, will he confirm that he himself said we would be wrong to leave the single market? Will he also confirm that the leave campaign made it very clear that we would not leave the European Union before a deal on trade—a long-term relationship—had been established with the EU? That is right, isn't it?

Mr Paterson: The right hon. Lady has done a very good job of infuriating the 17.4 million people out there and insulting them on a daily basis because of her stand. She and I were elected on a clear platform of leaving the single market, the customs union and the remit of the European Court of Justice.

Anna Soubry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Paterson: No, I am going to move on, because others want to speak.

I am aware that such views do not go down well in this House, but I really do appeal to Members to think of the reaction outside it. The anger is touchable. People expect us to leave. At the moment, there is a real,

existential threat to both the main parties. The first 100 marginals that the Labour party must win include 78 for leave, and we know that a similar number of the marginals that we on the Conservative side must win are strongly for leave. At the moment, we have a free market in terms of leave votes—UKIP has disappeared, and there is no one else. If we are so stupid as to pass this motion tonight and to go for a European election—I appeal to my colleagues on the Front Bench—we will singlehandedly give a new party an opportunity to emerge, funded with European money, and that would be a great mistake.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I say with the greatest of respect to my right hon. Friend that this is about getting it right for our country—for businesses and employees. It is not about grubbing around for votes.

Mr Paterson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Very helpfully, he has moved me on to my next point. I am looking at the clock, and I will be quite brief.

The biggest danger to business at the moment is uncertainty. Last week, sadly, we had the resignation of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris)—or “Dane-tree”, as it was pronounced when I used to work in Northampton. He said to the Prime Minister:

“whilst I would have preferred to leave the European Union with your deal, I truly believe our country would have swiftly overcome any immediate issues of leaving without a deal and gone on to thrive.”

It is absolutely clear that there has been a relentless campaign by “Project Fear” against no deal. There is no such thing as no deal; there has already been a succession of mini-deals. We were told that aeroplanes would not fly; that has been sorted out. We were told that drugs would not arrive; my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has fixed the drugs problem. We know from Monsieur Puisseuseau, who runs the port of Calais, that people there are relaxed. Looking at the World Trade Organisation terms, the WTO facilitation treaty, and the sanitary and phytosanitary terms, it is clear that it is illegal for our partners to arbitrarily stop the shipment of goods that conformed the day before we left. This whole issue of no deal has been blown up out of all proportion; it is a last stand for remain.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend seen the excellent article in the business section of *The Daily Telegraph* today, in which several very senior German people, including Mr Verheugen and others, have made it categorically clear that the failure of these negotiations is the fault of all the participants, including the EU itself?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for mentioning Mr Verheugen, who quite rightly warned about the dangers to the German economy, which, as we know, is sadly moving into recession. We will be doing the whole European economy a service if we resolve the wretched wrangle about Brexit now.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Paterson: I am going to move on, because I know others want to speak.

[Mr Paterson]

Under the legal position at the moment, unless the Government and particularly the Prime Minister take an executive decision, we will leave at 11 pm on Friday. That is the legal position, so all the pantomime we have had with the Bill over the past few days and last night is actually irrelevant. There has to be a Government decision. I appeal to the Government at this late stage to recognise the extraordinary anger outside this House at the fact that it is not listening to the 17.4 million people who voted to take back control. This issue could be resolved by leaving on Friday evening at 11 o'clock. Lo and behold, we would see that all these fears—there might be some interruptions, there might be some disruption—would be nothing like the damage to the integrity of our democratic institutions. People have said to me, “Mr Paterson, I voted all my life. I am never voting again because they”—all of us in this House—“are not listening.” That will be profound. That is a much bigger danger than a few small interruptions, which will be sorted out in the next few weeks.

4.20 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): May I wish everybody, not just the Brexiteers, a very happy National Unicorn Day?

I pay tribute to Members across the House, from all parties, who have made today's votes possible and who have tried to find a meaningful way through. In a Parliament of minorities, we will, increasingly, have to do that. I find it astonishing that we are still debating whether to rule out a no-deal Brexit. Even today, this most simple of moves—our amendment asks that the delay should be at least three months—seems like a measure that we should not even be discussing or debating, so straightforward and common-sense does it seem. Yet we are having this debate. I want to make it clear that from the SNP perspective we are nowhere near being any closer to finding a solution, and that means we need a lengthy extension to sort out the mess that the Conservative party has created for everybody in the UK. Ministers know that a no-deal Brexit would be devastating for jobs, the economy and public services. Ministers know that, yet there are still a number of them who would like to see us crash out on Friday night. That is, plain and simple, a case of putting party above country.

I pay particular tribute—I do not do this often—to those Conservatives who have sought compromise. They will disagree with me strongly and legitimately on a regular basis, but I pay tribute to the courage they have shown. The way that they are treated when they seek to reach compromise and reach out, as we all must in a Parliament of minorities, is an outrage. They find themselves being deselected and called all sorts of names that I will not repeat in this House. This is a party that has been taken over by its most extreme elements who want to crash out of the European Union: for trade deals that never materialised; for parliamentary sovereignty that disrespects the devolution settlement; and for democracy, as they call it, in a place where somebody can make laws due to an accident of birth. What kind of democracy is that?

We are in this mess because the Brexiteers could not even agree what kind of Brexit they wanted. They never even bothered setting it out. [Interruption.] I notice some chuntering from a sedentary position. Not one of them can defend that position.

Sir Hugo Swire: Am I not right in thinking that the referendum vote was the biggest expression of democracy this country has ever seen?

Stephen Gethins: There was a higher turnout in the Scottish independence referendum, when things were set out. There have been higher turnouts in general elections before. The right hon. Gentleman needs to recognise that democracy did not stop on the day of the EU referendum—nor will it stop on that day. I notice he did not bother to defend the point I was making about the Brexiteers not setting things out. He did not have the courage or decency to tell us why they did not set anything out. They had no plans and they are in a mess of their own making. President Tusk, who stood up for democracy and went to jail for democracy, was right to say that there is a “special place in hell” for those who wanted to leave the EU but had not even thought about how to do it. The particular hell that he referenced seems to have come early in a House of Commons that is blocked up by Maastricht rebels of a quarter century ago who are still fighting the same fights. We do not get time to debate the impact of Tory austerity on public services. We are not debating climate change, the biggest challenge of a generation. We are talking about process in Parliament—a Parliament that is increasingly failing.

On that point, we are being told by the Tories who backed Brexit that we have to leave now, with the disasters that that will bring, because of the European elections. Just think of that! A Parliament that is fully elected, with no appointed Members in sight. Imagine elections that give people decisions over their futures. We are told, however, that we should not participate in those elections because of what it will do to the Conservatives in electoral terms. I do not give a stuff about what it will do to the Conservatives in electoral terms, but I do care what a disastrous no deal will do to my constituents, and so should each and every Member of this House. When we have a Government who are talking about medicine and food shortages and unrest on the streets, that needs to concern each and every one of us.

Ultimately, I want to live in a Scotland that is not beholden to the extremists who are currently calling the shots in this place; that is comfortable with giving citizens and businesses the opportunities of all four freedoms that the EU has provided; and that welcomes the world and seeks to work on an equal basis with our neighbours. I want to live in a country that is happy to share sovereignty and resources over issues such as protecting the environment and medical research, rather than having nuclear weapons in Governments we do not vote for imposed upon us. But for now, just for today, getting to the end of the week without crashing out with a disastrous no deal is going to have to do.

4.26 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): We find ourselves in an extraordinary position, and we really cannot go on like this. It is exasperating our constituents, our businesses and our farmers, and it is exasperating this House and all its Members. This issue has to be resolved and not just kicked down the road even further. It is difficult to envisage how we could be in a worse position than we are now—except, of course, if the Leader of the Opposition was running things officially—so it is time for a few home truths.

This Act is a catastrophe. It is the culmination of weeks and months of attempts to obfuscate the single largest manifestation of the democratic will of the people of our country—for the Government and this House to deliver Brexit—yet I fear that that clear instruction appears as elusive as ever. This Act is the latest demonstration of remain-supporting MPs who think that they can overrule the will of constituents in the 406 parliamentary constituencies that voted to leave in the referendum, and who, in telling us constantly what they oppose and what they want to thwart, have rarely come together responsibly to find a solution that we can rally behind to fulfil the will and wishes of our people.

What we have witnessed is no less than a conspiracy of chaos to undermine Brexit. Saboteurs from the Back Benches and some Front Benchers have been trying to hamstring the Prime Minister's hand in trying to negotiate a workable deal by increasingly restricting the alternatives available to her. We have a Labour party whose policy has been to oppose everything and to fuel the chaos and indecision, and whose prime objective is just party political advantage.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Given that Conservative MPs voted en masse against just about everything in the indicative votes, where does the hon. Gentleman place his colleagues on the Government Benches in the hierarchy of chaos that he is outlining?

Tim Loughton: Let us remind ourselves of what has happened when it comes to voting for something that would take us through Brexit and end this chaos. On the Friday before last in the third meaningful vote, 89% of Conservative Members voted for the Prime Minister's deal. That included something like three quarters of members of the ERG, who compromised hugely to back that deal. Of the Opposition, all but seven Labour MPs voted against the deal and delivering Brexit and for continuing the chaos. That is the truth of the matter. The hon. Gentleman should not blame the Government for the lack of a deal; it is his side that has consistently voted against any deal on offer. That includes Labour Back Benchers who are in the difficult position of having constituencies that voted to leave by 60% and 70%, but who now think they know better.

The conspiracy of chaos includes the Independent Group Members, who have a strong vested interest in continuing the chaos and debate on Brexit—

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: I have not finished criticising the hon. Gentleman yet. If he will wait for the criticism, I will take the rebuff. Those Independent Group Members have a strong vested interest in continuing the chaos and debate on Brexit, because the minute it is resolved—and it will eventually be resolved—their common purpose is gone. They will have to come up with some non-Brexit policies that they can all agree on. Now I shall give way.

Mike Gapes: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I say just one thing to him. Members of the Independent Group voted the way they did because we recognise, along with many Members of all parties, that leaving the European Union will be a disaster for our country and that therefore we should put any proposed deal back to the people to give them the final say.

Tim Loughton: Yet page 24 of the manifesto of the hon. Gentleman's former party and page 36 of my party's manifesto, on which Members of the Independent Group held themselves up to their electorate, pledged that Brexit would become a reality—no second referendum, no thinking about it again; they put themselves forward for election to make Brexit a reality. The remarks of the hon. Gentleman therefore just do not wash.

Then we have the SNP, which is interested only in Scotland in isolation. *[Interruption.]* SNP Members are at least consistent in ignoring the results of referendums.

A conspiracy of chaos across the House has used every tool at its disposal to frustrate the Brexit process, however at odds with previous commitments on the record to honour Brexit, and tried to induce us all to believe that it has all become so complicated that we should just call the whole thing off. That should not and must not happen.

Despite my having argued and voted for a solution to Brexit by supporting the Prime Minister's deal on the last two occasions, as I am duty bound to deliver for my constituents who voted for me to do that, those who have consistently voted no to any solution now hold sway. The Act simply enshrines that conspiracy of chaos in law to extend the uncertainty.

The Act is an unprecedented abuse of parliamentary procedure, steamrolling the will of the minority through Parliament to change the rules of the game midway.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman—no.

Faced with that abuse, with the Prime Minister's inability to control her Cabinet, her Government or indeed Parliament, and with the determination of some Conservative colleagues, who should know better, but seem hellbent on flouting the instruction of the people who voted them in, I see no obvious way out of the mess that the House will rally behind.

My biggest fear is the continued uncertainty that further delay will bring to business in particular, whether it is weeks or months—and we are now talking years. We have not just kicked the can down the road; we have kicked it into the cul-de-sac and are now kicking it round and round the cul-de-sac, getting nowhere.

I therefore want to make a plea directly to the EU. We hear that European leaders have increasingly bypassed the Government and Ministers and appealed to individual Members to gain some idea of what is going on. So I now make a plea to President Macron and Chancellor Merkel and her colleagues in particular: "Please put us out of our misery now, as this House and the Government appear incapable of doing. At tomorrow's EU Council, please vote against further extensions to article 50 and oblige the UK to leave the EU on Friday on World Trade Organisation terms, given that you previously said you would honour any application for an extension only if there was a credible reason to do so. That credible reason does not exist. It is, after all, the default position that the Prime Minister always promised when set against a bad deal, and which all of us who voted to trigger article 50 and to pass the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 wanted to achieve, as the vast

[Tim Loughton]

majority did. If you agree to extend yet again, be in no doubt that you will unleash a further tsunami of chaos and uncertainty from which none of us will benefit. If the EU elections go ahead, it is highly likely that the UK will elect an army of Nigel Farage “mini-mes”, who, I am afraid, will wreak havoc with the European Parliament and wreck your calculations about the balance of power within the EU.

Let us be realistic: there is no prospect of any agreement between the Government and the Leader of the Opposition in the current talks, and there is certainly no prospect of an agreement that will carry the majority of Conservative Members with it. Moreover, it is likely that in a matter of months you will be dealing with another Prime Minister, with whom you may find it less easy to negotiate. If an extension runs for another year, you will have to resign yourselves to a further year of disagreement and obfuscation in the House of Commons, with the knock-on effects of chaos and the undermining of regular EU processes such as budgets and other measures to be negotiated.”

This is my appeal to the EU: “If you value your future, you do not want us to remain an integral part of it in the current circumstances. Do yourselves a favour, do this House a favour, do this country a favour, and say that the UK is out.” Then, armed with that certainty, let us all sit down constructively and pragmatically to decide what our future relationship will actually look like. Let it be one that works to our mutual benefit and sets a course on which we can remain friends, allies and trading partners in years to come, working together for a common purpose, but not as part of the same prescriptive organisation that this country, like it or not, voted to leave—and leave we must.

4.36 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and I were elected at the same time and sit together on the Home Affairs Committee, and we agree on many things, but it will not surprise him to hear that we strongly disagree on this Act and the risks of no deal. Let me gently say to him, and to other Members, that I think it would be really bad for manufacturers in my constituency to suddenly face customs checks, tariffs and delays if we end up with no deal, and I think it would be really bad for overstretched families in my constituency to suddenly face food tariffs and an increase in food prices. I also think it would be really bad for West Yorkshire police to suddenly lose, overnight, the policing and security co-operation on which they, and other countries, depend in order to be able to investigate the most serious criminals.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady also take into consideration the 14-page letter that was sent to Cabinet Ministers recently by the Cabinet Secretary, Mark Sedwill? It details some serious concerns about the impact of leaving. This is a letter from the country’s senior civil servant, who is not part of any conspiracy but who has responded to the duties that he feels he owes to the country. Is it not a salutary piece of literature to be put before anyone who would lightly advocate leaving with no deal for the sake of it?

Yvette Cooper: I think that that advice was very important. The job of the civil service is to attempt to do everything it can and strain every sinew to deliver the will of the Government of the day. The fact that Sir Mark Sedwill has given such advice shows quite how seriously that is taken. It is particularly significant that Sir Mark is also the Government’s national security adviser and the former permanent secretary at the Home Office: he will be well aware of the security and policing issues that we face.

I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has tabled this motion as a result of the Bill that we passed, which is now an Act. I think it shows that the Cabinet has taken that advice seriously, but also that Parliament as a whole has consistently opposed the damage and the chaos that no deal would cause. That is why we have reached this point, and it is why we should now support an extension. The purpose of the motion is to provide that parliamentary safeguard and a legal underpinning for the Prime Minister’s negotiations, so that she is not under pressure to slip backwards from the course she has decided upon.

We are here because the Prime Minister ran down the clock. She put forward a motion in December, although it was clear even then that her deal would be rejected, and then pulled the vote the first time. Instead of reaching out at that point, she simply ran down the clock, using the threat of an imminent deadline to try to force decisions. She has tried that process of brinkmanship in decision making repeatedly, but it simply has not worked. I just think that approach, like a continuing game of chicken, is a really bad way to make decisions. We have heard different concerns from different perspectives on the Prime Minister’s deal, but none of the assurances get any better simply because it is 10 minutes to midnight. Running down the clock was the wrong way to address those concerns. It would have been far better to have the kinds of debates and conversations that have now started in order to try to find a way forward. This is incredibly frustrating for people across the country, who are tearing their hair out about the way this has all happened. We should be honest about that. That is why we all have a responsibility to come together and try to find a way forward. The problem is that there are different views about different kinds of Brexit, and about different ways of reaching public consensus and consent. We have to be honest about those different views, tease them out and debate them, rather than thinking that the ticking clock will provide all the solutions.

Ms Angela Eagle: Was my right hon. Friend as surprised as I was to hear that the betrayal narrative is already up and running across the country, with claims about any kind of Brexit not being pure enough? We have today heard members of the Conservative party suggest that somehow the disaster of no deal is now the only desirable outcome.

Yvette Cooper: I think that there is a problem with the way in which everyone has been approaching the debate. Like my hon. Friend, I think that a no-deal Brexit would be deeply damaging to our constituents, but I also think that the continual attempts to suggest that there are betrayals and conspiracies make it harder for people to come together and reach a sensible and sustainable outcome.

One of the reasons we are in this situation is that there has been no attempt to build a consensus since the referendum. That is why I argued for a cross-party commission at the very beginning of this process, and for a process that would bring together leave and remain voters to try to work out the best way forward. Frankly, if we do not do that, nothing lasts. If everyone thinks only about winning in the short term and getting what they want straightaway, rather than about how we can build consensus for what is effectively a constitutional change, even if they win in the short term it will not last and whatever we get will end up unravelling.

Stephen Doughty: My right hon. Friend knows that I completely support her proposal for such a commission—indeed, that may still be necessary, whatever conclusion we reach. Does she agree that the danger for our European partners of lurching from one cliff-edge deadline to another is bad news for the negotiations overall? The longer flextension that has been proposed would be very sensible for the whole negotiations, on both sides.

Yvette Cooper: The idea of a flextension is a very interesting proposal. As I understand it, it would allow us to conclude the article 50 process at any point, if agreement is reached but, equally, we could take longer if we needed to. I hope that the Prime Minister will seriously consider that approach, because one of the reasons we are now in this situation is the focus on the date, whether 29 March or 12 April, and it is a situation of her making. None of those dates was in the original referendum in 2016; they are dates that she created. It reminds me of the debate we had on the Government's net migration target. The Prime Minister chose to make the net migration target a big focus, even though everybody knew that she had no plan to deliver it. However, that focus on the target ended up creating more anger, more confusion and a greater sense of betrayal. It is my fear now that again, in suggesting that it will be a betrayal if everything is not solved by a particular date, the Government and particularly the Prime Minister have made it harder for us to reach consensus. They have created more alarm and anger across the country instead of adopting a practical focus on the way forward.

The proof of that is the fact that we are here again without having reached agreement. The Prime Minister has tried to focus minds by using brinkmanship and creating dates and deadlines, but it simply has not worked. That is why we have to try to do this in a different way. We have to try to bring people together. We now have a process of indicative votes and cross-party talks—which, to be honest, should have started some time ago—but we also have to recognise that we do not have the same consensual political and parliamentary traditions that other European countries have been able to draw upon. I understand that, from the other member states' point of view, we can look very adversarial. We are having to do something that we have no tradition of doing in this House, but I hope that our attempts to do it now will be effective and will lead to a conclusion. I certainly hope that the cross-party working that we have managed to achieve to get this Bill in place and to get this motion to go forward will be an indicator that it is possible for us to draw on more consensual traditions when it comes to this kind of constitutional change.

Mr Bradshaw: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Yvette Cooper: I ought to finish, because other Members want to speak.

I shall conclude where I started by saying that, when we have constitutional change such as this, we need people to try to come together and reach agreement. No matter how we have voted over the past few months—and certainly the past few weeks—we have all had threats and abuse, including to our constituency offices. That is damaging to our democracy and to our debates, so I hope that we will be able to come together and find a way forward, and to support the Prime Minister's motion today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. There are 25 minutes to go and five people wanting to speak, so there will be a five-minute limit.

4.47 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is very nice to follow the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), because she talked about taking a consensual approach to this. The consensual approach of this House was to trigger article 50 and to decide on the date of 29 March. The extension that is being requested today is very open-ended, and I find this incredibly concerning. The rhetoric in the media surrounding the extension has been, as the Attorney General said today, that we might not have to take up our seats in the European Parliament if we end up taking part in the European elections. However, if the extension were to last a year or longer, those European parliamentarians might well be in their seats. I find it bizarre that we are talking about good behaviour and not interrupting a budget—in other words, trying to bind those people who might have stood on a manifesto of their own making or perhaps a Conservative manifesto, and expecting them to behave themselves and be good. I find that very worrying. If those discussions are indeed taking place, it would be even more worrying if a similar agreement were extracted from the Prime Minister of this country that she and the British Government should also behave themselves and not give due scrutiny to or make any criticism of the budget.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am following carefully what the hon. Lady is saying. Does she agree that it seems really humiliating for this country to have our Prime Minister going over to the European Union to beg for an extension? What does this say about our country when we know that 17.5 million people said very simply that they wanted to leave? That was very simple.

Mrs Main: I completely agree with the hon. Lady.

I should like to refresh the memory of those in the House who think that there is no problem in having this flextension. In 2002, a decision by the European Council stated:

“Members of the European Parliament shall vote on an individual and personal basis. They shall not be bound by any instructions and shall not receive a binding mandate”.

The article also stated:

“Members shall exercise their mandate freely and independently, shall not be bound by any instructions and shall not receive a binding mandate”.

[Mrs Main]

The loose talk about what we may or may not expect of our MEPs if we stand candidates in the next elections is extremely worrying. We have to take that seriously. People who stand in those elections should have every right to take up their seats as MEPs. It is likely that the House will not reach any form of agreement or consensus. It needs restating that only five Members of the official Opposition agreed to the separated withdrawal agreement. The political declaration has always been open for discussion, yet Labour seem to want to bind any future leader of the Conservative party. When people seek to bind the hands, the voices and the opinions of duly elected MEPs, who speak on behalf of their constituents, or of this Government, that is not democracy.

It is appalling that we may seek an extension with no real sense of purpose. If the Labour party gave an undertaking that it supported the withdrawal agreement and that its disagreement was simply with the political declaration, perhaps our Prime Minister could go along in the sure and certain knowledge that some sort of deal could be done fairly quickly.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Not only will there be no sense of purpose, but there is no certainty. My hon. Friend's constituents, my constituents and business are crying out for certainty, but there are Labour Members who will vote for this extension secretly hoping that it will not end on 30 June but that there will be further extensions. Does that not cause further uncertainty?

Mrs Main: As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) admirably said, the can has been kicked down into the cul-de-sac and it is now being kicked around the cul-de-sac.

My point is that there is no sense of purpose from the Labour party. Labour does not even want to get past first base of the withdrawal agreement, which would be absolutely necessary, and whatever political declaration it wishes to try to bind our Government's hands with. Our Prime Minister cannot go and seek any extension in the knowledge that she can give the European Union any form of assurances.

I would rather the Prime Minister did not seek an extension. We are becoming a laughing stock because we cannot stick by our words, by our manifestos, by undertakings that have been given in this House or by our vote to trigger article 50. I do not know why anyone would turn out for any future referendum, or even election, when they cannot believe a word of what goes on in here.

Labour Members need to look at themselves. They cannot get past first base. They need to say what a flexextension would be for. The withdrawal agreement would certainly be part of it. There is real unhappiness among the public that people say, "We need to be consensual," but only five Opposition Members reached across to be consensual with the Prime Minister. That says a lot.

I changed my position and voted for the withdrawal agreement, not because it is perfect but because I can see where the House is going. The House is doing its level best to bind the hands of the Prime Minister and potentially of any MEPs who are elected. It is trying to get them to play nice and to remove any scrutiny of the

EU budget. Taxpayers in this country have a right to expect their MEPs to conduct scrutiny, not to go and play nice because we happen to be leaving the club at some unspecified point.

I am against this extension, because I am not sure what conditions will be extracted for it and I am not sure that Labour will ever be prepared to withdraw from anything. They could not even agree to the withdrawal agreement. From what I can see, the whole point of this extension is to ensure that we are bound in our agreements with the EU and stymied by staying in, and that the can is kicked so far down the road that people argue, "Well, probably half the people who voted in that referendum are dead, so we need to bring it all back again." That is no way to treat the British public.

To those who say they want certainty, I say there is no certainty in a flexextension. There is no certainty in an open-ended agreement in which we say, "Let's keep chatting about it." This is the worst of all worlds, and I sincerely hope that all those Members who could not even bring themselves to support the withdrawal agreement, forgetting all the other things they were unhappy about, because they did not trust the Prime Minister, ask themselves how consensual that was. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford is busy on her phone, but I say to her that consensus works both ways. Five Labour Members, and no Independent Group Members, voted for the withdrawal agreement. That is how consensual the Opposition are. They are holding our Prime Minister, our country and this Brexit to ransom, and it is time they worked out that they will rue the day they did so.

4.54 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I begin by acknowledging that the Prime Minister, for the second time now, has decided to put the national interest before taking this country over the cliff of a no-deal Brexit. I say to Conservative Members who have argued for a no deal that at no point did the leave campaign suggest that it was proposing to the British people that we should leave without a deal.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and others for their role in encouraging the Prime Minister to act in the national interest because of this Act.

I will vote for the Government's motion seeking an extension to 30 June. We will not know until the end of tomorrow whether that date or a different date is granted, but there seem to be two truths here. First, the Prime Minister will have to take whatever date is offered to her. Secondly, having been granted a date—I hope we are granted a date—we will have to decide what on earth we are going to do with the additional time.

I welcome the fact that the Government have reached out to the Opposition and that the talks are taking place, but I gently say to the Government that the talks will require some flexibility and a willingness to compromise if we are to make progress, and I think that that should include a compromise on how we finally take the decision.

Why are we in this state today? The House has been very clear that it will not accept leaving without an agreement. We are also here because it has become clear that the promise that we could somehow, on the one

hand, bring back and retain all our sovereignty and, on the other hand, keep all the economic benefits of European Union membership was not true. The Prime Minister's deal lays that bare, which is why some Conservative Members cannot bring themselves to vote for her deal, because it confronts them with a choice that they are not prepared to make. We have heard their criticism, but the irony is that if all the Conservative Members who campaigned most passionately for leaving the European Union had voted for the deal, we would be out by now. But this is not a choice that the nation can continue to avoid. We must confront it.

The Attorney General spoke wisely when he told Nick Robinson the other day that, on Brexit

"we have underestimated its complexity. We are unpicking 45 years of in-depth integration. This needed to be done with very great care...It needs a hard-headed understanding of realities."

That is why I would argue that the situation today is different from the situation in June 2016.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that part of the shame of this process is that the Government could ever have underestimated the impossibility of unpicking 46 years of close co-operation?

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman points to one of the other truths about this process, which some people were sadly unwilling to acknowledge in campaigning to leave. The fact that they never had a plan has been exposed for all to see. I have learned over two and a half years just how much the complexity of these relationships means to businesses, companies and individuals the length and breadth of the land.

I think people knew why they voted in the way they did—no one is saying they did not—but what they were offered did not and does not exist. Therefore, is it not time for us to put that truth back to the British people? Especially as the more time that passes, the more the mandate from the referendum of June 2016 will inevitably age.

I do not know whether the British people have changed their mind, but I have come to the conclusion that we should now ask them whether they wish to confirm their original decision in light of the real choice that confronts the country, and not the fantasy that was offered three years ago. If we agree to do that we could move on because, however long the extension that is granted, and we must hope and pray in the national interest that we get one tomorrow, the continuing drama, the anger referred to by Conservative Members—I acknowledge that anger, which the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) spoke about with real passion—and the uncertainty could finally be brought to a conclusion in the capable hands of the British people.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. It would help if Members confine themselves to three minutes each.

4.59 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): As ever, it is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I agree with everything he says. Every time I hear a right hon. or hon. Member on the

Government Benches making the case for a no-deal, off-the-cliff, hardest-of-all Brexits, I grow stronger in my belief that I did the right thing by leaving that party. The fact that people who claim to be the party of business are doing the one thing that British business does not want—it would be "ruinous", in the words of the Business Secretary—fills me with absolute astonishment, but that is the future of the Conservative party. The direction of travel is towards a far-right, extreme version of Brexit. It is not acceptable.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): May I put on the record that not everybody on this side of the House shares that view? The right hon. Lady knows from our conversations that my constituents and I do not share it.

Anna Soubry: I do not doubt for one moment that the hon. Gentleman does not share that view, but the reality is that the majority of members of the Conservative party, as we heard in earlier speeches, are travelling in that direction. The next leader of the Conservative party will be exactly the sort of person who believes in the most ruinous version of Brexit—a no-deal Brexit.

I was heartened to attend a rally at lunchtime today in central London organised by People's Vote. What a rally it was. People from all backgrounds, of all ages and from all over the United Kingdom came together in support of sending this matter back to the British people. The star of the rally was undoubtedly the brilliant Baroness Boothroyd, who got a standing ovation before she even spoke. After she spoke, she got another rousing standing ovation, and rightly so. She reminded everybody in the audience that she is in her 90th year—I do not think she wanted that broadcast. The point that she made so beautifully, compassionately and passionately is that this issue is not about her generation. Indeed, it is not about my generation either—I am 62. It is about our children and grandchildren. The overwhelming message from that rally was that many young people have spoken to their parents and grandparents, who are now in turn increasingly saying, "Yes, we voted leave, but now we have listened to our children and grandchildren as we have seen the reality of Brexit unfold. We have changed our minds." It is profoundly ironic that there are right hon. and hon. Members on the Government Benches who have changed their minds and voted for the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement, but they deny the people of this country, two and a half years on, the right to a final say and to change their minds too.

People talk about the will of the people, but the evidence is clear that the will of the people is changing. In any event, 63% of people in this country did not vote to leave the European Union, and the 52% who voted for it did not vote for this Brexit chaos and this Brexit crisis. As they see Brexit unfold, they are increasingly demanding a final say and a people's vote. I will vote for this motion, but I want a longer extension so we can have a confirmatory vote—a people's vote—because that is the only way out of this crisis.

5.3 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the right hon. Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for getting us as far as we have got today.

[Tom Brake]

On the extension, I certainly would not want our friends in the European Union to think that 30 June is, by any stretch of the imagination, ideal or leaves us satiated, because it does not. It is clearly not long enough for a people's vote, although it clearly is long enough for the European elections to take place, which the Liberal Democrats and a number of other parties will fight very hard and positively.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the June date would not allow enough time, not only for the people's vote, but also for some kind of process, like citizens' assemblies, that might just have a chance of bringing the country back together again, by addressing some of the very real reasons that people voted leave in the first place?

Tom Brake: Absolutely, and clearly an extension could be used for that purpose, or indeed for expanding on the process that is already taking place, with all the parties in this place—with the exception, I am afraid, of the DUP—working across parties to try to find a way forward. What the hon. Lady suggests could be part of that process.

The extension is not long enough for a people's vote, which would probably require 20 weeks or thereabouts for planning and for campaigning, so we need an extension until September at the very least. I want to help the Prime Minister. She should accept the flexextension that we hope will be offered to her tomorrow, because that will save her from embarrassment in the future. Members will recall that she said there would not be a general election, and then there was; that she was going to stand by the withdrawal agreement that she had spent months negotiating with the European Union, which she then did not; and that she said there would not be an extension to the article 50 period, and then there was. So she could save herself a lot of embarrassment by simply accepting that there is going to be a people's vote, so a long extension is required to deliver one.

We are assuming, of course, and I think it is a safe assumption, that we will be granted an extension by the European Union, but if we are not, we need some clarity from Ministers as to what exactly will happen—what the next steps that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who is now in his place, referred to actually include. Will those next steps include, if we do not get an extension to the article 50 period, revoking article 50 by the end of this week? If the Minister wants to intervene to confirm that that is the case, he is welcome to do so. He has a frown on his face, but I think he is reflecting intensely on that.

I shall conclude by saying again that the Prime Minister must face up to the truth. She will need a long extension. She should grasp it tomorrow, to avoid humiliation a few weeks later when she would have to go and ask for it.

Mr Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) to speak very briefly; I also want the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) to get in.

5.7 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): People who voted leave in Swansea voted for good things. They voted for more money, more control, more trade, control over immigration. Now they finally see that they will not be getting any of those things. They are having to pay more money. There will not be more trade. We will have an open border in Northern Ireland. So they are saying to me that they have been let down, and they want to vote on whether the deal stacks up to what they were promised—and it will not.

I very much hope that we will get a long extension, so that there can be a proper collaboration between the parties to put a Labour-Tory mixed deal to the country so that people can decide whether they are better off in or out of the EU.

Everyone who talks to me in Swansea is saying, "This is taking longer; it is costing more; it is much more complicated than we were told before." The French are now saying that, in the event that we do not agree a deal and we do not have a long extension, the default position that we have chosen is no deal; but frankly, the people who voted leave do not even like what they are seeing with the deal, let alone no deal, which would be a complete calamity. Given that the House has now voted several times to say no to no deal, it is important that the default—

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Geraint Davies: No, I will not.

It is important that the default position is not no deal, but revocation. I introduced a Bill, the European Union (Revocation of Notification) Bill, to that effect. It is important that we remember that we should stay where we are.

I had the great privilege of opening an exhibition in memory of Henry Richard, who, as people will remember, was the "apostle of peace" who was an MP in this place until 1888. He put forward the arbitration in the treaty of Paris that ended the Crimean war. He was very much of the opinion that the canvas for future peace and prosperity should be across Europe. Obviously, we saw the bloodshed of the first and second world wars, but now we have a situation where Europe is in jeopardy of breaking apart. At last people are beginning to think that we have made a mistake, and a lot of older people are saying to me now, "I voted to leave, but I have concerns, I have guilt, and I want to make things better. I want to vote on whether we do in fact remain in the EU." So I very much hope that we will have a flexextension, and that we will have an opportunity to talk again about a possible deal, and put that to the people. In my mind, we should stay where we are, with the best deal—in the EU.

5.9 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Jaguar plant lies at the heart of Erdington, which is rich in talent but one of the poorest constituencies in the country. The plant was turned around from closure in 2010, doubling in size to 3,300 jobs. It has transformed the lives of thousands of workers locally. It has now lost 1,000 jobs. It would be unthinkable to put it at risk.

The voice of the world of work could not be clearer—to the CBI and the TUC, we are facing a national emergency, so they say no to no deal. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders on building cars, the ADS on building planes and Make UK, the former Engineering Employers' Federation, all say that a no-deal Brexit would be a catastrophe. The Food and Drink Federation says that prices would soar and that no deal would be a disaster. Our farmers would face immense problems with our biggest market, on the continent—no deal would be a disaster. The Investment Association is talking about the billions in money now flooding out of the country, rather than being invested here in our economy. The British Ceramic Confederation warns that household names will close in the next stages—the quintessentially English product of the Potteries.

There are those who believe that they know more about building cars than those who build cars, more about building planes than those who build planes and more about national security than the head of national security, who has warned against the catastrophe of a no-deal Brexit. Those people are wrong. They talk about a managed no deal, but that is like a managed parachute jump without a parachute. Were we to plunge over the cliff into a no-deal Brexit, our country would be the poorer in every sense of the word for a generation. The task now is for us to come together in Parliament to find a way forward and a better deal for Britain.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to Tory colleagues with whom we have worked, the right hon. Members for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for her outstanding leadership—all working together to prevent a no-deal Brexit. Why? Because it would be a catastrophe that our country would take a generation to recover from. We cannot go over the cliff.

5.12 pm

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Speaker put the Question (Standing Order No. 16(1)).

The House divided: Ayes 420, Noes 110.

Division No. 413

[5.12 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Afolami, Bim
Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Argar, Edward
Ashworth, Jonathan
Atkins, Victoria
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benn, rh Hilary

Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berger, Luciana (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Chris Leslie*)
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Brabin, Tracy
Bradley, rh Karen
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brine, Steve
Brock, Deidre

Brokenshire, rh James
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Buckland, Robert
Burden, Richard
Burghart, Alex
Burgon, Richard
Burt, rh Alistair
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cairns, rh Alun
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chalk, Alex
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Glyn
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debonnaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dowden, Oliver
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Duguid, David

Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellis, Michael
Ellman, Dame Louise
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glen, John
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Grady, Patrick
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, rh Damian
Green, Kate
Greening, rh Justine
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louise
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Luke
Hamilton, Fabian
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Carolyn

Hart, Simon
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Healey, rh John
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hermon, Lady
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Hussain, Imran
 James, Margot
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Diana
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Darren (*Proxy vote cast by Kerry McCarthy*)
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keegan, Gillian
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 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
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McMahan, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, David
 Morris, Grahame
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Ian
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newlands, Gavin
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norris, Alex
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Perkins, Toby
 Perry, rh Claire
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Philp, Chris
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Pow, Rebecca
 Powell, Lucy
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Quince, Will
 Qureshi, Yasmin

Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Rutley, David
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Alok
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft*)
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Snell, Gareth
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spellar, rh John
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, John

Stewart, Rory
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Streeting, Wes
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Swinson, Jo
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tredinnick, David
 Trickett, Jon
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Walker, Thelma
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Phil
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Alister Jack and
Jeremy Quin

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
 Amess, Sir David
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, Suella
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Bruce, Fiona
 Burns, Conor
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman

Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Double, Steve
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evnnett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Field, rh Frank
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Girvan, Paul
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Gray, James

Green, Chris
Griffiths, Andrew
Halfon, rh Robert
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hoey, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hughes, Eddie
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, rh Mr David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Main, Mrs Anne
Mann, Scott
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Mercer, Johnny
Metcalf, Stephen
Mills, Nigel
Morris, Anne Marie
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti

Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Shannon, Jim
Simpson, David
Smith, Henry
Smith, Royston
Sturdy, Julian
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Watling, Giles
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Noes:
Dame Cheryl Gillan and
Mr Simon Clarke

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House agrees for the purposes of section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019 to the Prime Minister seeking an extension of the period specified in Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union to a period ending on 30 June 2019.

Housing

5.30 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing.

As we forge a new relationship with the European Union, building the homes our country needs is a mission more important than ever, because a home is so much more than a roof over your head; it speaks directly to your hopes and dreams—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The Minister is speaking about an important subject, and we must hear what he is saying.

Kit Malthouse: As I was saying, a home speaks directly to your hopes and dreams and gives your children a good start in life. It is about moving to take up a better job and anchoring yourself in a strong and confident community. However, for too many, particularly young people, a decent, affordable and secure place to live can feel out of reach. We remain determined that that must change.

Housing is this Government's chief domestic priority, and our progress is already clear. For the first time in 10 years, home ownership among 35 to 44-year-olds is up. We have helped over 500,000 people into home ownership since 2010 through Government schemes such as Help to Buy and right to buy. Last year, we built more homes than in all but one of the last 31 years, bringing us closer to our ambitious target of 300,000 new homes a year. However, there is much more to do if we are to meet people's aspirations.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Minister apologise to all those sat waiting and languishing on homelessness waiting lists across the country?

Kit Malthouse: I have many times, at this Dispatch Box and elsewhere, accepted the fact that Governments of all stripes over the past three or four decades have failed to build the houses that the country needs, and we all share some culpability in the housing crisis we are now facing. The question is not how it came about, but what we are doing to address it.

When I took on this role last year, I made my task a simple one: more, better, faster homes. I will begin with "more", because we are taking bold action on a number of fronts to increase supply. We are putting billions into housing and infrastructure—at least £44 billion over five years. We are reforming planning and we have empowered Homes England, our new national housing agency, to take a more strategic and assertive approach to increasing supply. We have recently announced the award of £1.2 billion of grant funding from our £5.5 billion housing infrastructure fund. The seven successful schemes have the potential to unlock up to 68,000 new homes, and we look forward to announcing further awards in the coming months.

We are not looking only to the market to deliver; we have paved the way for a new generation of social housing by removing the Government cap on how much councils can borrow, so that they can start to build a new generation of community homes.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Minister on staying in post for as long as he has, which I should say is quite unusual for Conservative Housing Ministers. What, however, can he say to Greater Manchester, which has apparently been told that the Government are withdrawing their offer of £68 million to remediate brownfield sites?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are in ongoing discussions with Manchester about its housing ambition, but one of the frustrations in that conversation is the unwillingness of the Mayor of Manchester to take responsibility for housing figures in that city. As I say, if he is willing to be ambitious, we would be willing to support him as well.

Jim McMahon: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: No.

In addition to our affordable homes guarantee scheme, which gives £3 billion of guaranteed support, making it cheaper and easier for housing associations to raise funds and get building, we are increasing supply as the means to make the most of the space we already have, including land that has already been built on. With that in mind, the planning proposals and consultations announced in the autumn statement aim to give people more flexibility to build upwards on existing buildings and in converting commercial properties. This is a positive step that ensures we conserve precious land, accelerate supply and help to revive our high streets.

We are also looking at how we can close the gap between planning permissions and homes built, and we will be taking action on the back of the review by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) to do just that.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I want to take my hon. Friend to one particular issue. One of the big problems we have had is that the building regulations are set against a new type of homes—prefab homes made of wood or steel—which can be built throughout the year, which would accelerate the whole building programme and which are ecologically far better than brick-built houses. Yet people always tell me that they have to make all sorts of adjustments just to meet the building regulations. Will my hon. Friend undertake to look at that, because these homes would accelerate the whole process of house building and make it much more affordable too?

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend, with his usual wisdom, has prefaced the part of my speech I am moving on to. He is quite right: we believe that modern methods of construction hold enormous potential not only to produce more homes but to produce them faster and better. I recently visited a factory in Walsall, in the west Midlands, where Accord is building 1,000 homes a year using modern methods of construction. So good are the environmental standards that those homes for social rent have lower arrears, because people can afford to heat them.

That is something we are backing through our £4.5 billion home building fund, £2.5 billion of which is to champion small and medium-sized enterprises, custom builders and more diverse builders to get modern methods of construction and other cutting-edge tech into the mainstream. The fund has already allocated all of the

original £1 billion of short-term funding. Over 94% of the funding contracted to date has gone to SME builders. We expect the fund to deliver more than 30,000 homes—around 5,000 more than the original target.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Minister is quite right that we are going to need a whole variety of different types of houses and tenures to hit the 300,000 target. How many homes does he think will be built for social housing—not affordable housing—in the rest of this Parliament? What is his plan?

Kit Malthouse: I am constantly asked what targets might be for particular types of housing.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): 12,500.

Kit Malthouse: Well, 12,500 is the minimum amount that is due to come out of the affordable homes programme. We hope and believe that the aspiration may be more, not least because we have taken the cap off the housing revenue account. It is therefore up to the ambition of councils whether they do this. As the Chairman of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), knows, I would love to sit in my office in Whitehall and plan the country—the Malthouse period of planning. I could plan in his constituency, as I could in mine, and decree what all these targets might be. However, as he knows, there are numerous housing markets in the UK—there are probably 30 or 40 in the capital alone—and they all operate in a different way, with lots of variable sites that all have their own issues and problems that need to be dealt with, so we are setting a standard target across the country as an aspiration. However, by setting councils free to build a new generation of social homes and investing enormous amounts of money in the affordable homes programme, which can also be for social homes, we hope and believe that that tenure will advance and increase to play its part in the 300,000 homes that are, we hope, coming in the years ahead.

I am mindful that, with such a dramatic increase in supply, the more we build, the more important it is that we get it right. That is why we are focused on building better. A key part of that is communities having a bigger role in shaping the future of the places they call home. We are making changes to our planning system, and in particular the planning rule book, so that they can do this. We are providing greater clarity and certainty for developers and communities alike, by giving local areas more options and the freedom and flexibility to make effective use of the land they have. That is crucial if we are to reassure communities that promises made on the provision of affordable housing and infrastructure will be promises kept. Keeping promises is the only way to ensure that communities will continue to have faith in new developments.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In March last year, the Secretary of State wrote to 15 local authorities that had not submitted local plans. I understand that, as of now—a year later—10 of those have done so. Should the Government not be doing more to pressurise all local authorities to make sure they submit local plans to plan housing for their areas?

Kit Malthouse: Yet again, my hon. Friend shows his legendary impatience to build the homes that the next generation needs. He is quite right that we are urging,

cajoling and pushing councils across the country to get their plans in place. We hope and believe that a plan-led system will produce more and better homes across the country, and also that, when a local authority puts its weight behind a plan and starts to think in decadal terms, perhaps, about how its area should look and how it should plan for homes, we will be able to help it with infrastructure. We have seen that in parts of the country from Carlisle, to Exeter, to Oxfordshire, where forward-thinking civic leaders are able to think 10, 15 or 20 years ahead. They are then able to come alongside us for big infrastructure asks, assistance, and, frankly, large cheques to assist them with that sort of ambition.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On neglected areas of housing that do not get much ministerial airtime, can I first ask the Minister about new homes for people who are elderly? What further funding does his Department intend to allocate? Also, housing co-operatives rarely get any attention in this House. Does he—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. That intervention is too long. Before the Minister answers the hon. Gentleman, I must point out to the House that, for obvious reasons, this is a very short debate. We have to finish in an hour and 20 minutes. Fifteen people have indicated to me that they want to speak. At present, that gives each Backbencher three minutes. If people who do not intend to stay for the whole debate and do not intend to speak make interventions of more than one minute, there will be people at the end of the list who will not get to speak at all. It is not up to me; it is up to the House as a whole to decide how we will conduct this debate.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman raises a pertinent point. As I tour the country, I go to lots of places in all parts of the country with significant brownfield land. One of the cries I hear from people in meetings is, “Where have all the bungalows gone?” That is a proxy for: where is the move-on space for older people whose children have left home and feel they need to downsize? We are keen to try to stimulate and encourage an, if you like, less than prime market that provides the kind of homes that older people would like to occupy. Key to that will be encouraging more participants in the house building market, as well as giving local authorities, as we have in the National Planning Policy Framework, the power to devise in their plans the type of housing that they need. It is perfectly possible for the hon. Gentleman’s local authority to signal in its plan that that is the kind of housing it requires.

We have also seen how community support increases when we build homes that grow a sense of place, rather than undermine it. It is why we are championing design and quality through the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. We reinforced that in February when we hosted a second national design conference. It is increasingly important as we create new settlements across the country, such as garden communities. Last month, we announced support for a further five garden towns with the potential to deliver up to 65,000 homes, in addition to the 23 locally led garden communities we are already supporting.

It is not just about getting numbers up, however. We are determined to put fairness back at the heart of the housing market. Our commitment to restore the dream of home ownership remains as strong as ever. That is

why we have committed to a new Help to Buy scheme, which will run from April 2021 to 2023. We have cut stamp duty for first-time buyers and put a call out for evidence on innovation in shared ownership. We believe that the private rental market can be a stronger platform for those aspiring to home ownership, turning “generation rent” into “generation own”.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): When I met the Minister recently, he assured me that Government housing estimates were not a target. Yet within hours of that meeting his own Department informed the Greater Manchester Combined Authority that its housing deal was being scrapped because the new housing estimates were not sufficient. How does the Minister justify that contradictory statement?

Kit Malthouse: I think the hon. Gentleman is confusing two things. He is quite right that the standard assessment of housing need is meant to be a starting point from which councils assess, plus or minus, what they think they can address, subject to constraints and their other duties in the planning system. That, however, is separate from the Government’s housing deal. We are using the money available for those deals to stimulate ambition. Local authorities should deliver more than would otherwise be delivered in their plan and can justify the need for infrastructure on that basis. We have done successful deals, for example with Oxfordshire, and we are having a number of conversations. Critical to that is stimulating and encouraging every part of the country to play its part in building the homes the next generation needs by being ambitious about their targets.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Minister talks about being ambitious and setting targets. Does he accept the figure, published by the Shelter commission in January, that we need to build 155,000 social homes a year for the next 20 years?

Kit Malthouse: I accept that we need to build a hell of a lot more homes of all types and that is exactly what we are trying to do. We are in the process of creating a situation where everyone who wants to build can build and can seek assistance from the Government to do so, if they are willing to be ambitious—from the private sector to housing associations, councils or anybody who wants to build. We think that this problem is so acute that we cannot be partial about who gets to build the homes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sorry that I came into the debate a bit late; I was held up. On encouraging local authorities to build, exactly what help can the Government give local authorities to build social housing? I have had a number of people who are homeless—I have had families—coming to my surgeries desperate for accommodation. The local authorities do not have the resources. How is the Minister going to provide them?

Kit Malthouse: As I hope the hon. Gentleman knows, we lifted the borrowing cap on local councils so they can now borrow to build a generation of new homes. We have opened up the affordable homes programme to councils to bid in for Government money—grant funding—so that they can seek to build social homes. I am more than happy to write to him with details of how his council can access that.

[Kit Malthouse]

Turning back to ownership, as I said, I wanted to turn “generation rent” into “generation own”, but we also believe that fairness should not stop once people get the keys. That is why the Secretary of State unveiled a new industry pledge last month to bring an end to onerous lease terms, such as the doubling of ground rents. More than 40 leading developers and freeholders have signed that pledge and I encourage others to follow the lead. We are bringing forward legislation to require developers to belong to a new homes ombudsman to champion the rights of home buyers and to ensure that they get the quality build that they rightly expect. We will soon consult on how this will work so that we can ensure that consumers’ problems are resolved faster and more effectively.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On behalf of Members on both sides of the House, I welcome what my hon. Friend has said, and I thank the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend for their work on this. Will he or one of his colleagues make a statement as soon as Homes England approves commonhold houses for the Help to Buy scheme, and will he make a statement on when the Land Registry can easily register commonhold associations? At present, there is one development on the way, but it is being blocked because the Land Registry has forgotten how to do it.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend, in his customary manner, has raised an important but detailed point. I will go away and ascertain what the timetable might be and keep him posted about where things might go next.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): Does the Minister accept that “generation own” is particularly challenging in areas such as South Hams in my constituency? It has the highest property price to earnings ratio in the south-west—11.7—and part of that is driven by second home ownership. Will he touch on what can be done where the impact of second home ownership is particularly high to make this an affordable dream for young families?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady raises an issue that, in certain parts of the country—including in my constituency—can have an impact, albeit that I think it is sometimes overstated. Having said that, the Government have taken steps, such as giving councils the power to charge premium council tax on empty homes and second homes, which should help with that issue. In the end, however, in areas such as the hon. Lady’s, most of the problem will be solved by increasing supply. I recently attended a meeting with the Campaign to Protect Rural England down in her part of the world, where I tried to explain to 240 people who were not best pleased at the idea of having a significant number of homes in their area that this was their moral duty to the next generation and that they needed to accept the homes, control them, design them well, and make them fit in and enhance their local communities. We have a growing population and in popular areas where people want to live and from which young people are often driven out, the solution will be to build more homes.

Happily, the picture is also improving for renters. We are cracking down on rogue landlords and from 1 June, the Tenant Fees Act 2019 will come into force, banning

unfair letting fees and capping deposits. These vital steps will protect tenants and save them millions. We will also set out our position shortly on longer-term tenancies, because those in the private rented sector can face a high degree of insecurity. It is time that we put that right. Indeed, landlords could also benefit from more stability. As well as feeling more secure, nothing is more important than people being safe in their homes, so we will also be implementing a new regulatory framework for building safety. It is no small task but it is the debt we owe to those who suffered so terribly from the Grenfell fire, because everyone must be safe and feel safe in their home, no matter where they live.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The Minister knows that I have residents in New Providence Wharf who are being pressured by Ballymore to pay for the removal and replacement of defective cladding. He has kindly looked at that issue. Will he assure us that the Government will continue to press companies to accept their responsibility and the cost? Can he tell us anything about progress, particularly in New Providence Wharf?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman has met me to press his constituents’ case. In turn, I have raised the matter face to face with the representative of Ballymore. We continue to put pressure on the industry generally to do its duty to leaseholders and critically, to remediate to ensure that everybody is safe in their homes. However, I am more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman in the next few days about the progress we are making generally on the issue.

Catherine West: I thank the Minister for taking a further intervention on Grenfell. Can he confirm that every single tenant who was made homeless as a result of the terrible fire in the Grenfell block has been housed?

Kit Malthouse: Sadly, I cannot quite confirm that. We are very close to completing the rehousing of everybody who was involved in the Grenfell Tower fire. At the moment, the numbers remaining are small and the cases are often complex, and we are making significant progress.

I am also mindful of those without a place to call home. When I reflect on what we can do better, I am clear that we must do everything possible to confront rough sleeping and the broader challenges of homelessness. Our cross-Government, £100 million rough sleeping strategy is helping our rough sleeping initiative reach more parts of the country—now more than 75% of local authorities in England. As part of that, we announced £46 million to support people off the streets and into accommodation in 2019-20, because we have already seen how that can work and make a real difference. Recent figures have shown the first fall in the number of people sleeping rough in eight years. However, we should make no mistake: one person sleeping rough is one person too many and we remain more determined than ever to end rough sleeping for good. That means combating homelessness, and our ambitious £1.2 billion package of support will help tackle it in all its forms, giving some of the most vulnerable people in our society the security and dignity they deserve.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): While the Minister is on the subject of homelessness, will he urgently review permitted development, which allows

some homeless families, including those who live in Terminus House in Harlow, to be housed in wholly inappropriate accommodation and bring up their children in a new slum? The permitted development regulations need to be looked at urgently.

Kit Malthouse: We have made a commitment to review the implementation of the permitted development rights policy. However, alongside that, I urge local authorities to use the maximum power available to them through their building regulation powers and other forms of inspection to ensure that the homes people inhabit are suitable. I also urge local authorities that place people in those homes to reassure themselves that they are suitable for occupation. We have often found that people in unsuitable homes are placed there by councils that frankly should know better and should seek higher quality accommodation for their residents.

As I hope I have shown, we are making every effort to get everyone on board to deliver not just more homes but stronger communities. My triple challenge—more, better, faster—is the key to the country's happiness, health and prosperity and the work is starting to pay off. The number of homes built is up, rough sleeping is on the turn, there is greater fairness in the rented sector and more beautiful and innovative places to call home should start to appear. We have every reason to be confident and optimistic as we look forward to our future outside the European Union. A stronger, fairer, more diverse housing market can be the bedrock of our future success—a way to spread opportunity and ensure that no one is left behind. We remain focused on delivering that and fulfilling the basic promise that each generation must make to the next: that their life will be better than ours.

5.54 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I am glad that so many Members are keen to speak in the debate, which has been delayed for too long and is unfortunately too short. It has been almost a year since we had a housing debate in Government time. The Secretary of State told us in December:

“Housing remains the Government's top priority”.—[*Official Report*, 10 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 18.]

It is a pity that he has not made it the top priority in his diary today.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Healey: No.

It is good to see the Housing Minister speaking for the Government today. He not only told the House that housing was the Government's chief domestic priority, but told an industry conference in February that

“once we get beyond Brexit, housing will be the Government's priority.”

Given the mess that the Government have made of Brexit for more than two years, and given that the Prime Minister is in Europe today begging for an extension just so that we can move on to the next stage of the negotiations, that bodes badly for the Government's future focus on housing. I have to say to the Minister that Brexit is a very feeble alibi for a totally non-Brexit Department with six Ministers and 2,000 civil servants.

I enjoyed the Minister's speech, but the story that he tries to tell is so at odds with the experience of millions of people up and down the country that he and his colleagues risk sounding complacent. They risk sounding as if they just do not get it. They do not get the public's anger and frustrated hopes of a housing market that they feel is rigged against them. They do not get the despair at being one in a million on council housing waiting lists when the number of new homes for social rent built last year was just 6,453. They do not get the lives blighted by bad housing—children growing up in temporary accommodation hostels, renters too scared to ask landlords to do repairs, young couples stripped of the hope of home ownership and prevented from starting a family or putting down roots—and they do not get the fact that a systematically broken housing market demands wholesale change and cannot be fixed without big action from Government.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Is the current situation not ridiculous? In Hartlepool, for instance, we have in-house poverty. There are people who have lived behind boarded-up windows for more than a year, just because they are scared of raising the issue with the local authority or their landlords.

John Healey: Unfortunately, although there are good landlords and many tenants are satisfied with the homes that they rent, my hon. Friend has described the experience that too many of the country's now 11 million renters face from day to day. After nine years in office, the Government just cannot carry on talking about what they are going to do. What they are doing at the moment simply is not working.

Kevin Hollinrake: The right hon. Gentleman has mentioned nine years, and what we are going to do. Does he not accept that the number of housing starts is roughly 100% higher than it was at the lowest point under a Labour Government in 2009? If he is not sure about that, he need only speak to any brickie, chippy or sparky. They will tell him that they are a lot busier than they were back then.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman has a very short memory. In 2009 we were in the direct aftermath of a global financial crisis and recession. It was the action that the Government took then that kept house building going and helped to pull the country out of the crisis. More than a decade on, under this Government, the level of house building has still not reached the pre-crisis peak. We have seen a pitiful performance over the past nine years. The public have lost patience with a Government who, nine years on, try to blame their Labour predecessors.

The Government's record is now very clear. The rate of home ownership is lower, with almost 900,000 fewer under-45s owning a home now than in 2010. The level of homelessness is higher: the number of people sleeping rough on our streets has more than doubled since 2010. Private rents are higher, with the average tenant paying £1,900 more than in 2010. The rate of social house building is lower, and in the last two years it has been the lowest since the second world war. Let me say this to the Minister. If the Government had only continued to build homes for social rent at the same rate as Labour did in 2009, there would be 180,000 more of those homes—more than enough to house every family in

[John Healey]

temporary accommodation, every person sleeping rough on our streets, and every resident in every hostel for the homeless.

The Minister said, in response to an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), “We are very close to completing the rehousing of everybody who was involved in the Grenfell Tower fire”. I have to say that, nearly two years on from that shocking national tragedy, the Government’s action is still on go-slow. He would not give the House the figures, but one in 10 of the residents from the tower and one in three of the residents from the wider estate who were involved in the fire still do not have a permanent new home. Eight in 10 residents of other high-rise blocks across the country that are covered in Grenfell-style cladding have still not had it removed and replaced. Those are residents in 354 high-rise blocks across the country, nearly two years on from the fire.

Kit Malthouse: I want to correct the right hon. Gentleman on the rehousing numbers for Grenfell, not least because I hope he would never seek to use it as a political football. We are putting enormous efforts into rehousing residents. Of the 202 households from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk that required rehousing, every one has accepted an offer of either high-quality temporary accommodation or permanent accommodation, 196 have moved in, 181 have moved into their permanent home, and 15 remain in temporary accommodation. Six households remain in emergency accommodation—two in hotels, three in serviced apartments, and one living with family or friends. There is a constant and ongoing conversation with those people about their needs and requirements. We are taking this very slowly and sensitively. We cannot compel anyone to do anything. We are working closely with them to try to ensure that they get the homes they need. It is unfair of the right hon. Gentleman to try to make out that we are being dilatory in that effort.

John Healey: The Minister does himself, the Government and the Grenfell survivors a disservice when the story he tries to tell with those figures is so at odds with the experience of the people affected by the fire.

Catherine West: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a fundamental imbalance when the Persimmons of this world are gaining all the benefits of being involved in the housing market, while tenants in places such as Grenfell are getting a really rough deal?

John Healey: It is the most obvious sign of a broken market, when house builders are making bumper profits and bumper bonuses building homes that ordinary workers cannot afford to buy. These are the fundamental facts. These are the hard truths about the Conservatives’ record on housing, which Ministers cannot deny or disguise, and which, come the next election, the Conservative party will not be able to dodge.

Given that record over nine years, it is little wonder that, when asked, three in four people say that they believe the country has a housing crisis. They are right, of course. Everybody knows someone who cannot get the home they need or desire. They say that the crisis is getting worse, not better, and they are right. Even many

Conservatives have lost faith in the free market fundamentalism about housing, because it is failing on all fronts. That is why the Conservatives have been losing the argument and have been forced to cede ground to Labour, from legislating to outlaw letting fees, to banning combustible cladding on high-rise blocks and lifting the cap on council borrowing to build new homes.

However, those are baby steps. The biggest roadblock to the radical changes needed to fix the housing crisis for millions of people is the Conservative party itself. It is largely the same ideologically inflexible Conservative culprits who are making the Prime Minister’s life so difficult over Brexit who will not countenance the Government action that is needed to deal with the other big challenges our country faces: social care, falling real wages, deep regional divides and, of course, housing. So after nine years, we must conclude that the Conservatives in government cannot fix the housing crisis, and that it will fall to a Labour Government to do that.

Here is the plan. We will build 1 million genuinely affordable homes over 10 years, the majority of which will be for social rent, with the biggest council house building programme in this country for nearly 40 years. We will reset grants for affordable housing to at least £4 billion a year. We will scrap the Conservatives’ so-called affordable rent and establish a new Labour definition linked to local incomes and not to the market. We will stop the huge haemorrhage of social rented homes by halting the right to buy and ending the Government’s forced conversions to affordable rent.

We will end rough sleeping within five years, with 8,000 new homes available to those with a history of rough sleeping and a £100 million programme for emergency winter accommodation to help to prevent people from dying on our streets. We will legislate so that renters have new rights: to indefinite tenancies; to new minimum standards; to controls on rents; and to tougher enforcement. We will give young people on ordinary incomes the home ownership hope that they deserve, with first-buy homes, with mortgage costs linked to a third of local incomes and with first dibs on new homes in their area.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am sure this is already on my right hon. Friend’s radar, but disability groups in Bristol are worried about the shortage of accessible homes in the UK. They say that something like 1.8 million households require some sort of adaptation or the addition of access features to their homes, but very few of them get that at the moment. Is it part of the future Labour Government’s plan to build more accessible homes?

John Healey: It is indeed, and if my hon. Friend looks at the big Green Paper plan that Labour has published, “Housing for the Many”, she will see that we talk not only about building more but about building better. We talk about doing what the public sector has often done in the past—namely, building to better standards. We want these to be the highest standards of design, accessibility, energy efficiency and high tech, so that in future, Labour’s affordable homes will become people’s best choice, not their last resort. Finally, we will create a fully fledged new Department for Housing, both to reflect the scale of the crisis and to drive our national new deal on housing. This will be Labour’s long-term

plan for housing that will help to fix our country's housing crisis. Where this Government have failed, a Labour Government will bring in the radical change that so many millions of people now want and need.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There will now be a three-minute limit, and if anybody would like to drop out, that will help others.

6.7 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): This Minister does get it; he works day and night to ensure that he delivers the homes that the nation needs. He knows that I am a champion of community-led housing, and I was delighted that the Government responded so positively to the campaigning of myself and colleagues for the establishment of the community housing fund. It was first announced in the 2016 Budget with a commitment to invest £300 million over five years, with the money coming from the proceeds of extra stamp duty on second home sales. Money was allocated to 148 local authorities, roughly in proportion to the number of second homes and affordability issues.

I believe that the fund will transform the community-led housing sector. It is expected to deliver 10,000 homes by 2021. However, the fund ends with the end of the current spending period. With more than 3,500 homes now in the pipeline, it is essential that the fund is extended to the next spending review period so that those homes can be delivered. Because of the delay in the spending review, there will now be a significant period of uncertainty for groups. Money must be spent by March 2020, so few bids will come forward from this point on. The spending review will not conclude until the autumn statement, at the earliest, and there could be further delay and indecision following that. So groups, including those in Cornwall, face an invidious choice. Should they continue to work on their projects and hope that funding will come through, or should they wait and potentially stall and collapse?

In the social housing Green Paper, the Government acknowledged that housing associations could deliver more if they were given more time. That is more true for this sector than for any other. To illustrate my point, the Cornwall Community Land Trust, a well-respected enabler of community-led housing, estimates that the discontinuance of the community housing fund could put up to 230 community-led homes in jeopardy.

I am sure we all agree that we need to deliver more genuinely affordable homes for local people in beautiful coastal communities where there are very high house prices, such as those in Cornwall, where it is so attractive for people to buy second homes. We need those affordable homes to sustain communities for generations to come, so I urge the Minister, who I know wants to ensure that my constituents and people all over the country have high-quality homes to live in, to make an urgent statement about the continuity of the much-supported and much-needed community housing fund.

6.10 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker; it is a wee bit sooner than I had expected to be called, but I am glad to speak for the SNP in this debate. Our record on housing in

Scotland is excellent and far outstrips the record of the Conservatives in England. I am sure there is much the UK Government could learn from what Scotland has done.

Part of the problem with the Conservatives' approach is its ideological underpinning. They insist on the dream of everyone owning their own home, totally undermining the fact that many people can live long, happy and productive lives in social rented housing. For many of my constituents, a social rented house is an aspiration, and they are perfectly happy to live in one. Indeed, my gran lived in social rented housing her entire life and never owned her home.

The Tories' record on housing is one of their failed promises. The UK Government talk big but deliver very little, with flagship manifesto pledges disappearing almost as soon as they are made. House building in England has fallen to its lowest level since the 1920s, while evictions are at a record level, the lead cause of people becoming homeless is the end of a tenancy, and a mere one in five council homes is replaced when it is sold.

Contrast that with Scotland, where we have ended the right to buy for social rented housing, securing social rented housing stock for the future. No longer do houses disappear from the social rented sector and reappear almost instantly in the private rented sector at inflated rents that people cannot afford to pay. We have secured that investment, which has meant a huge amount to many of my constituents and to people right across Scotland.

In England in particular, hundreds of thousands of people are stuck on social housing waiting lists because new stock just is not being built and houses that are sold off are not replaced. All the while, homelessness is up by 50% and rough sleeping has risen for seven consecutive years. I note that the Minister said rough sleeping has fallen recently, but that is on the back of huge spikes.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady talks about the great things happening with housing in Scotland, but what does she make of the fact that the target of delivering 35,000 homes between 2007 and 2016 was missed by 50%? Only 16,000 of the planned 35,000 were delivered.

Alison Thewliss: The Scottish Government's house building record has been excellent. We have a target to build 50,000 new homes during this term of the Scottish Parliament, and houses are being built right across the country. The hon. Gentleman will remember from our time together on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee how well the Scottish housing sector was spoken about by those who came to give evidence to us. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) should pay no attention to his colleague the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who, as he often does, has his own axe to grind on all this.

It is widely recognised that the Scottish Government are leading on housing policy. Our legislation on secure tenancies and in other areas has given renters in the private rented sector huge security. Ensuring that everyone has a safe, warm and affordable home is central to the Scottish Government's vision of a fairer and more prosperous Scotland. People cannot get on in life if they do not have a secure tenancy, a warm home and a roof over their head.

[*Alison Thewliss*]

The SNP remains on track to deliver on our target of building 50,000 affordable homes during the lifetime of this Scottish Parliament, which is backed by more than £3 billion of investment in the sector. There were 18,750 new build homes completed across all sectors in the year ending September 2018, an increase of 4%, or 635 homes, on the previous year. The latest statistics show that the Scottish Government have delivered nearly 82,100 affordable homes since 2007, which is significant. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire chunters from a sedentary position, but things are not going nearly as well in England. We are building proportionately more homes, more quickly, and he would do well to listen to us about this.

That is all in the face of the challenges of austerity. Housing associations tell me they are deeply concerned about the Government's social security policies. For example, the roll-out of universal credit has negatively affected both tenants and landlords due to the major increase in rent arrears. I hear that from housing associations in my constituency and across Scotland, and my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) could tell the House how housing debt has soared astronomically and how the Government have not learned the lessons.

A report this month from the Scottish Government shows that in East Lothian, for example, 72% of social housing tenants claiming universal credit are in arrears, compared with 30% of tenants overall—that is happening across England, too—and with a trebling of evictions for non-payment of rent over the year since universal credit was rolled out.

Some 88% of local authorities expect an increase in homelessness as a result of welfare reform over the next two years, and 75% expect that the roll-out of universal credit will increase homelessness. We are doing what we can in Scotland, and we have introduced a full mitigation of the bedroom tax, which people in England still have to pay. Without that, 70,000 individuals would lose, on average, around £650 a year. We also provide additional funding for direct mitigation of welfare reforms, direct support for those on low incomes and advice and other services.

Further, concerns remain on the UK Government's right-to-rent scheme. There is a lack of clarity on what will happen with the scheme, and the Scottish Housing Minister, Kevin Stewart, has been in touch in light of the recent High Court ruling. What is actually going to happen with the right to rent? We need to know for the security and safety of our tenants in Scotland.

We are still waiting on the courts to see whether Serco's lock change policy in Glasgow of August 2018 is unlawful. The policy has led to huge distress among those in the city of Glasgow with insecure immigration status, and we need to know the answer so that those affected have some certainty.

In Scotland, we are also taking a range of actions to bring empty homes back into use. There are many empty homes that could provide people with good housing and a secure future. Since 2010, the Scottish empty homes partnership has been instrumental in bringing more than 2,800 empty homes back into use, each and every one of them hugely valued both by communities that do not want empty homes and by

those now living in them—the homes are no longer going to waste. Empty homes partnership funding is to double from £212,500 in 2018 to over £400,000 in 2021 to bring those empty homes back into productive use and to make homes for people who need them very much.

We have also created an ending homelessness together fund of £50 million over the five years from 2018-19 to support the prevention of homelessness and to drive sustainable change. Scotland has some of the world's strongest rights for homeless people, but we are not resting on our laurels.

We are doing much more to tackle rough sleeping. We have a national objective to eradicate rough sleeping, and we have established a homelessness and rough sleeping action group chaired by Jon Sparkes, the chief executive of Crisis. The group has developed 70 recommendations on the actions required to end rough sleeping and transform the use of temporary accommodation. The Scottish Government accepted those recommendations and are now taking them forward. Jon Sparkes has said he is

“very pleased the Scottish Government has given in principle support to all of the recommendations on ending rough sleeping from the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Action Group. The members of the action group have gone above and beyond to dedicate themselves to bringing forward the right recommendations that will have the biggest impact on the way people sleeping rough can access and receive services.”

In that light, we have been piloting Housing First. This is hugely important, and it will have a huge impact on reducing homelessness.

The Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), has been to Scotland to hear about what is happening, and she has noted that she is pleased with what Scotland is doing—she said so at Question Time, so I assume she still is.

A recent documentary visited various cities, and the connectedness of services in Scotland—different services speaking to one another and taking action—was well commended, but we do not rest on our laurels. When there are still people sleeping on the streets of Glasgow, we must do more to ensure rough sleeping is ended, and ended soon. The Scottish Government's strong direction of travel is key. We need to prioritise that, but it takes a lot more than warm words and things said in statements and manifesto pledges to make that happen.

Before coming here, I was reflecting on the number of housing developments in my constituency in the past few years. Off the top of my head, new houses have been built for social rent in the Gorbals, Pollokshields, Govanhill, the Toryglen transformational regeneration area, Oatlands, Calton, Bridgeton, Dalmarnock, the city centre, Anderston, Kinning Park and the Laurieston transformational regeneration area. None of them happened by accident. They happened because of the work of community-based housing associations, which strive to develop, build more and house their local communities. That comes on the back of the Scottish Government supporting them in everything they do and ending the right to buy to ensure that their investment is sound and can continue. The UK Government would do well to learn from what has happened on housing in Scotland, because our record is a good one.

6.20 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The residents of the Witham constituency are concerned about a wide range of housing matters. Ministers might be familiar with some of them, but I want to pick on three examples.

First, the issue of how the five-year land supply is calculated affects communities across the country. In planning applications and appeals, we see developers trying to pick apart the declared pipelines in councils' local plans. To be frank, highly paid consultants and advisers are producing lengthy reports for applications and appeals, and the public struggle to contest them because they do not have the resources. I have seen many cases in my constituency of developers trying to pick apart the council's supply pipeline and go against local community planning and the council's planning objectives. That is not good enough.

We all recognise that the delivery of land and housing can sometimes be beyond councils' framework and mandate. I urge the Government to look again at how much weight is applied to the five-year supply. We must ensure that councils and communities have more protection. Developers think that by ripping apart five-year supply calculations, they can develop almost anywhere. That is a major issue across the board.

Kit Malthouse: I hear what my right hon. Friend is saying. She is making a strong point. I hope she agrees that part of the solution is to encourage neighbourhood plans, particularly in her constituency.

Priti Patel: I thank the Minister for that point. I will come on to that. Like all Members of Parliament, I want to see my communities empowered in planning decision making. In Witham town, there was recently an application for Gimsons—a site at River View in Witham—which is deemed a visually important site and is highly regarded by everyone in the community. The current local plan protects it from development. The draft local plan, which could be two years away from adoption, recommends approximately 40 dwellings, but an application for 78 came along and was granted permission. The residents were appalled that their views were ignored.

I am a great believer in neighbourhood plans and I encourage all my parishes to develop them. We want much more support for community-based planning and neighbourhood plans, particularly with parish councils. I urge the Minister and his team to give more resource to parishes and communities so we can ensure that they are protected from developers, who sometimes come along wanting to rip up the five-year land supply and to challenge councils and communities. Importantly, we must ensure that there are resources and that place-shaping can happen. The Minister has already spoken about that.

My final point is about the ways in which we can support housing and development. The Minister spoke about garden settlements. We have had many conversations and I urge him to ask the Secretary of State to reply to me—we have some outstanding correspondence. There is a huge opportunity for all Departments to work together to ensure we have integrated planning. That means that we have the right infrastructure, including road and rail, health, schools, and public amenities and services. That is a great programme that our Government could take forward. I urge the Minister and his colleagues

across Government to work in an integrated way so we can drive the right kind of local community outcomes on housing and planning.

6.24 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I take the Minister back to my intervention about social housing. Let us go back to 2010. The biggest cut in expenditure that the coalition Government brought in was a 60% cut in social housing capital funding. If we are to build the 300,000 homes that I think both the Government and the Opposition are now committed to building, we shall not get them built unless at least 100,000 or more come from the public sector. Just look at the figures since the war. We have built 300,000 homes a year in this country, although quite a long time ago, but in no year when 300,000 homes were built were fewer than 100,000 built by councils and housing associations—and mostly by councils. That is the reality. The Minister says that the housing revenue account cap has been lifted. That is really welcome and I applaud the Government for that, but that of itself will not get the houses built.

The Minister should not sit back and say, "I sit in my office and I cannot tell councils what to do." It is about not just borrowing the money but being able to fund the borrowing. The Government will have to look at more revenue support for councils and housing associations to get those numbers up. Of course, there will have to be developments such as modern methods of construction, which the Select Committee is examining at present but, in the end, revenue funding is crucial.

I also say to the Minister, in terms of the HRA, the funding does not only go to build new homes; it is vital to make sure that existing homes are properly maintained. In 1997, when the Labour Government came in, there was a £19 billion backlog of disrepair in the social housing sector, which the decent homes programme had to deal with. So councils have that responsibility. They will need extra revenue support to build the homes.

I shall make a couple of points about the private rented sector. There are now more people living in the private rented sector than in the social housing sector. Hopefully, we might reverse that in future by building more social housing. I say three things to the Minister. First, let us have some more tough powers to deal with bad landlords. The Select Committee recommended, in extremis, confiscating the properties of landlords who put the health and safety of tenants at risk. Let us go for that. Secondly, let us give councils more freedom: selective licensing can work. If councils want to do it in their area, they should be free to do so. The Minister reviewing the whole process of selective licensing—I hope that is where we get to—but, in the end, selective licensing works where councils can go into properties proactively and seek out the problems and the problem landlords, and deal with them. Thirdly, the difficulty for councils is that selective licensing needs resources. Since 2010, the funding for private sector housing teams in councils has been cut by 60%, and it is not possible to deal with bad landlords proactively, constructively and properly without more money.

I say to the Minister, therefore, that there is a major financial challenge, both in terms of building social housing and of properly dealing with the problems in the private rented sector.

6.27 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak after my Select Committee Chair; we agree on much, although I am not sure about selective licensing, which is too often a licence to print money for some local authorities. It is also a pleasure to speak with the Housing Minister on the Treasury Bench. I feel, from my short time in Parliament, that he has got at least as good a handle on these issues as anyone I have seen.

We need to build more truly affordable housing, both to rent and to buy. We cannot simply do what Labour would do—put more pressure on an overburdened taxpayer. We must do it in different ways. The best way to do it is to cut out the middlemen or middlewomen; I speak as a middleman who has been involved in the property market for 30 years. There are a couple of simple ways we could do that that are simply too good to miss. The Housing Minister is familiar with some of my ideas on this, particularly on delivering more affordable homes to purchase through the section 106 system.

Every year, we deliver around 25,000 affordable homes through section 106 requirements. They are typically sold to housing associations at 50% of market value. The housing association then rents them out at 80% of market value and puts them on their balance sheet at 100% of market value; nice work if you can get it. Why, instead of doing that, do we not simply sell those properties—or half those properties—to first-time buyers on low incomes, at 50% of market value? That would be in perpetuity and those first-time buyers could pass the properties on to the next person. There is no cost to the taxpayer whatsoever. It is good for them. It is good for the developers, who are dealing direct with their customers. The only people who probably will not be too keen on it are the housing associations, but that is not who we are here for; we are here for real people.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend has raised this issue with me a number of times. I am keen to promote it with him. Will he meet me to discuss how we might promote it to councils?

Kevin Hollinrake: I certainly will.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I will just say to the Minister, you took 27 minutes or more, and every time you intervene puts another minute on. In fairness, I want to try to get everyone in.

Kevin Hollinrake: This proposal is also good for the community because people are buying those houses rather than renting them, which is very popular locally. To give a local example, in the town of Easingwold where I was born and brought up, 656 homes are being delivered, 279 homes affordable, all for renting, and only eight are two-bedroomed properties for young first-time buyers. That dynamic could be changed, and tens of thousands of homes delivered for first-time buyers on low incomes.

The second way to cut out the middlemen is through the pension system. Currently, residential property cannot be put in a pension. If we change that rule, lots of empty or unconverted space above shops could be changed overnight. We should allow those properties to be put in a pension, as long as—this would be the catch,

but it is a fair one—those properties were made available at a social rent. We would widen the pension system to allow people to buy property to put it into a pension, as long as they let it out at a social rent. That would be good for the owner as a tax break and great for the tenant, and great for the taxpayer because the burden of housing benefit is reduced. Everyone wins, apart from the middleman.

6.31 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I was staggered to hear the Minister's complacency about homelessness, which is wholly misplaced. In my region of the west midlands, which is under a Tory Mayor, homelessness or rough sleeping is up by 333%. Homeless people are dying at the rate of one a fortnight. I want this House to hear, to know and to remember the names of those who have died in the past 15 months alone: Paul Williams, Laura Cairns, Steve, Daniel Hutton, Alain Simmonds, Daniel Clements, Terry Taylor, Jayne Simpson, Michael Hill, Peter Mbugua, Simon Holmes, Linda Grimes, Remigiusz Boczarski, Peter Corker, Joby Sparrey, Julie, Thomas Pulham, Kane Walker and two men whose names are known only to God.

The homeless people I see on the streets of Birmingham often live in medieval conditions. I have met people in subways in their hospital gowns and people with rat bites fighting and fearing sepsis, and yet the homeless people in Britain's second city, in the sixth richest economy on earth, face a health system that is rated inadequate and a mental health service in which the caseload is rising four times faster than funding, and where only 1% of the money promised to the West Midlands combined authority for housing has actually been paid over to build new homes.

That roll of names is a roll call of shame. I hope that in our city, if not elsewhere, we build a permanent memorial, so that we are confronted every day with the names of those who died, the names of those whom we have collectively failed. The best memorial of all, however, would be to end this scandal for good and to sweep the disgrace of homelessness into the history books once more.

6.33 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): On no issue save housing is the chasm more evident between the platitudes we heard from the Dispatch Box and the reality that MPs experience every week in their constituencies. One in seven homes in my borough is overcrowded, and housing conditions are the worst I have seen in 30 years, in particular in the private rented sector. That is why we needed the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), to call out those absolutely disgusting and appalling conditions in which families are living every day in my constituency.

As for affordability, for the bottom quartile of homes—that is, the ones that should be most affordable—the average price is more than £500,000 in my constituency. Average monthly rent is over £2,000, and the ratio between house prices and earnings is over 20:1. And yet, because of the way in which the Government implement policies like the benefits cap, the reality is that people simply cannot afford to live in areas where they, their families and their communities have lived for decades. The only remedy is the sort of radical programme that my right hon. Friend the shadow Housing Secretary has set out.

It is possible to make a difference locally. We do not have local elections in my area this year, but for those who do, I will just outline the difference between having a Labour council and a Conservative one. My council was Conservative until 2014. In its last four years, it sold off more than 300 empty council properties because they had become vacant. That included three and four-bedroomed houses, and many two-bedroomed houses and flats. These properties were sold off on the open market, putting them out of reach of families forever and a day. Cynically, that council then took a housing waiting list of over 8,000 families and reduced it to over 1,000, simply by knocking families off the list. In many cases, the council did not even have the courtesy to tell them. That degree of cynicism and that type of social engineering has gone on not just in my borough, but in many boroughs across London and elsewhere—and it is a moral crime, not just bad policy.

I contrast that situation with the position of my council under Labour. This issue is one of the reasons that Labour was elected in Hammersmith and Fulham, and was then re-elected with a landslide last year. Labour-run Hammersmith and Fulham Council stated this month that it

“has recently secured more than 1,600 genuinely affordable homes in the borough at zero cost to taxpayers after negotiating a series of deals with developers.”

That is the difference that Labour makes in local government, and I believe that in national Government—with this sort of programme of housebuilding, and the crackdown on poor landlords and poor conditions—we can actually tackle this crisis. It is not just that this Government are complacent; as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) said, they simply do not care to solve the housing crisis in this country.

6.36 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Land Registry figures estimate that 19% of property sales in my constituency in 2017 involved leasehold homes. That is nearly one in five homebuyers who are experiencing the injustices of the leasehold process. I have received 54 responses to a consultation that I launched on this matter, and there was an overwhelming sense of injustice and frustration with the leasehold process, in line with the findings of the Select Committee. Constituents made comments such as:

“I feel stuck in a loop”,

and said that they felt that they were “being held hostage”. Others said:

“I’ll have nothing to leave for my children”.

One of the most common situations I have heard about is when homeowners wish to move home in order to downsize before retirement, but no company will offer a mortgage on the property because the lease is not long enough. Those people either have to find someone to buy the property cash in hand, or extend the lease. But extending the lease costs at least £10,000 and is frankly not an option for many of my constituents, who want to use that money to live on for the rest of their retirement.

The Minister has stated many times that at least there is choice in the property market for those who may not wish to buy freehold, but the evidence collected by the Select Committee and the heartfelt responses I have received suggest that this so-called choice is anything but.

It is not a choice if there is a lack of information about what leasehold means, and 36% of the responses to my survey indicated that people were unaware of what leasehold meant at the point of sale. It is not a choice when homebuyers are not told that the property is leasehold until the very day that they are signing for their new home, which is what three of my constituents told me had happened to them. It was also not a choice for 13 of my constituents who told me that, after saving up and wishing to buy the freehold, and paying numerous administrative fees—in the hundreds of pounds—the freeholder simply said that they were not willing to sell at that point. It is not a choice for those families.

Another injustice is that of leases being sold by the freeholder to third-party companies, without any consultation, correspondence or notice given to the leaseholder. Where is the accountability? My constituents are telling me of their increased anxiety at the fact that their property does not “feel like their own”, and saying that “outside people control their destiny”.

Does the Minister agree that this is not a healthy situation for any family to go through? This is the home that people have worked for, saved for and are paying for. I hope that she understands that this is not just a case of a few people feeling a little disgruntled at the system. I hope that she will really take into consideration the well-researched Select Committee recommendations, and specifically consider an investigation into the widespread mis-selling of leases.

6.39 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I urge everybody here to have as the backdrop to every single decision we make the emergent climate change emergency that our country and our world face. In the short time available, I will make a plea to the Minister to look specifically at modular homes, which offer an environmental and energy-efficient solution. The Labour Front-Bench team has committed to build 1 million affordable homes, and we should make sure that we build them in a way that does not harm our environment any more than it has already been harmed.

Because of its affordability and its green footprint, I think the future should be modular. In my constituency, I have had the pleasure of watching modular social housing coming up just outside my office. They are some of the most energy-efficient homes in the country. Not only are they providing people with a beautiful place to live, but they are helping them save money.

As I am sure the Minister is aware, Hull is the caravan building capital of the country. We have fantastic skills in my constituency, with an industrial base and knowledge that have developed over generations. I urge the Minister to look seriously at the businesses in Hull and to give them a secure funding stream and stability, so that these modular building companies have the capacity to develop and invest. These are uncertain times and there is uncertainty for business investment, but having a promise from the Government that they see modular homes as the way forward and are willing to invest in innovation would give those businesses the security they need.

Finally, the Minister or anyone else is always welcome to come and see the beautiful modular social homes in my constituency, because I really think we need to look at them again if we are serious about protecting our planet.

6.41 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Minister spoke of the difficulty of quantifying Government targets for different types of housing. This is what can be quantified: the 1.25 million people on the waiting list for social housing, the 123,000 children living in temporary accommodation, and the fact that more than 99% of homes to rent in the private sector in Lambeth and Southwark have rent that is above the local housing allowance cap.

This Government are failing, as the coalition did before them, by cutting the subsidy for new social housing, redefining affordable housing to make a mockery of the word “affordable”, penalising residents with the bedroom tax, and lining the pockets of shoddy developers such as Persimmon and unscrupulous private sector landlords. The Government are also presiding over the disastrous relaxation of the rules on permitted development rights. In the time left available to me, it is this policy that I will focus on.

The expansion of permitted development rights is delivering poor quality homes in former office buildings up and down the country, resulting in children playing in industrial estate car parks, poor fire safety standards, and homes that are not homes but essentially hotels by the back door that are let out through Airbnb and other platforms for short-term lets. Most shockingly, having introduced this major planning reform, the Government have undertaken no evaluation of its impact and propose further expansions that would enable developers to demolish and rebuild office buildings without planning permission.

This policy is removing quality control and democratic accountability from housing delivery. Councils and communities have no say, and the developers who profit from these developments make no contribution to local community needs or the delivery of genuinely affordable housing. In many areas, the expansion of permitted development rights is delivering the slums of tomorrow and the fire safety horrors of tomorrow. This is happening on the Minister’s watch.

I therefore urge the Minister to do one small practical thing: to halt the expansion of permitted development rights while a full evaluation of its impact is undertaken, and to restore housing delivery to the full democratic control of local authority planning departments, which can decide where their communities need new housing, say where it should be built, and secure affordable housing contributions and funding for community facilities, so that we build not the slums of tomorrow but the high-quality, sustainable, affordable communities that this country so desperately needs.

6.44 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am sure we all welcome debating a subject other than Brexit. If I was to use the issues that constituents come to see me about in my surgery as a guide to what else we should be talking about, housing would come at the top of the list every time. From the parent facing eviction from their private tenancy with no permanent housing options on the table, to the tenant coming back to me for the fifth time because the damp still has not been fixed, to the young couple whose kids have to share a box room totally unsuitable for them, it is very clear that we do not have enough housing at the right prices or of the right tenure.

On a positive note, my local council, Chester West and Cheshire Council, is now building council housing, the first for nearly 40 years. I am delighted about that, but we still have less council housing than we had a couple of years ago, due to a huge increase in right-to-buy applications. Who can blame people for wanting to take advantage of 70% discounts? The policy, however, is short-term in the extreme. It is, of course, the Government’s stated aim that every council property sold under the right to buy should be replaced, but the reality is that, rather than one-for-one replacements, it is more like one new property for every four sold. The situation is clearly unsustainable.

There needs to be a wholesale change in the culture of and approach taken by developers. There seems to be general agreement across the political spectrum that we need to build more homes, but those good intentions are at risk of failing because there is an over-reliance on the market to deliver those aims. To date, the private sector has shown itself incapable of working in a way that chimes with the needs of the country. To put it mildly, I remain to be persuaded about the altruism of the house building industry; one need only look at the £100 million Persimmon bonus to see where its priorities lie. Plc house builders that help themselves to more than £8 billion of taxpayers’ money through the Help to Buy scheme show their true colours when they rip off their own customers through “fleecehold”. They have a lot to answer for.

The reliance on a small group of developers has been a very poor deal for the taxpayer, and that is the backdrop against which the leasehold scandal emerged. I look forward to the Government’s response to the excellent report by the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government. I hope concrete action will be taken soon.

Many in the industry have signed a pledge to move away from onerous leases, but to be frank I think that has happened only because there has been so much bad publicity against the people guilty of this wholesale scam over the years. The pledge also seems hollow to those of my constituents who have been notified in the past couple of weeks that their freehold has changed hands again, from one opaque company based in Guernsey to another opaque company based in Guernsey. The industry pledge intends to make the whole process “cheaper, easier and more transparent”,

but actions such as those in my constituency will make it more expensive, more difficult and less transparent for people to buy out their freehold. The only way these rapacious people will be brought to order is through changes to the law, and the sooner the Government get on to that, the better.

The biggest developers in the country have not just ripped off millions of homeowners; they have ripped off all of us. We should not rely on them to solve the crisis we face. The housing market is broken and needs radical intervention, and it certainly needs a Labour Government.

6.47 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I was delighted to hear the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). She spoke about the damage that right to buy caused in Scotland, so I will not focus on that in my short speech. Instead, I will focus on investment in new socially rented stock.

After years of under-investment in social house building, work is now under way to deliver 50,000 affordable homes in Scotland by 2021. People around the east end can now see the tangible results of that investment—whether on Cranhill's Bellrock Street, Easterhouse's Auchinlea Road or Shettleston's Wellshot Road—because work is under way to invest in new housing, which will go some way towards meeting the demand we face.

That 50,000 target, though, should only be a starting point. I have been very clear with the Housing Minister, Kevin Stewart, that we need to keep up our investment in new build social housing. I was encouraged to hear him say at a recent Tollcross Housing Association event that, for so long as associations can keep up the house building, he will be happy to sign the cheques.

The reality, however, is that we will quickly run out of space to build those new properties, which is why we must also protect and preserve our existing tenement stock housing. As the MP for Glasgow East, I am acutely aware that about one third of my housing stock is made of tenement properties. A quick drive along Tollcross Road, Baillieston Main Street or Westmuir Street will demonstrate that. The fact is that Glasgow's tenements have become a rich part of the city's architectural heritage, and my local housing associations genuinely understand the importance of maintaining them to meet the demands of their waiting lists. They want to invest in and preserve those buildings for generations to come, but that comes at great cost and there is a role for the British Government to assist with that.

This morning I suggested to the Chancellor of the Exchequer that VAT could be reduced on tenement repair work. Currently, an association wishing to undertake costly works to preserve tenement properties will have a 20% VAT charge slapped on to the invoice. If the Chancellor was willing to look sympathetically at a reduction in VAT for that type of work, it would allow associations to invest in tenement stock and simultaneously provide a fiscal stimulus for the construction industry.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): In Glasgow, the city council, Scottish Canals and housing associations are working together to promote self-build, not least along the banks of the Forth and Clyde canal. This is affordable self-build, which is another way of helping to stimulate investment in the local economy, as well as providing suitable housing.

David Linden: Absolutely. I am conscious of the constraints on time, so I will just conclude by saying that Glasgow is a city bursting with ideas about how we can progress housing and meet the challenges head-on. I urge my hon. Friend to take that forward, and I urge the Minister, in summing up, to touch on the point about reducing VAT, particularly on tenement properties.

6.50 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On average, house prices are 10 times wages, and we know this skews our local economy but also drives the housing poverty that is so damaging to my city of York. The Lib Dem-Tory council has presided over this housing failure, with a fall in social housing when there is such desperate need, while at the same time developers have made their millions building luxury apartments that our city just does not need. City of York Council should be getting

to grips with what is happening in housing, but it has failed, and I am glad the Government have rejected its local plan.

Just last Monday, the council failed again when it signed off a 72 acre brownfield site for over 2,000 luxury apartments that our city does not need. I would juxtapose that with the 11 homeless people who lost their lives in our city last year, and with the people I see in my surgeries who are living in box bedrooms—whole families are in that situation—with adults and children sleeping on sofas. That is the reality of York, as so many people in housing poverty know. Not only that, but the council has handed over its influence over the future of that site, through a commercial agreement, while contributing £35 million to the site. This must be stopped and reviewed. Residents are rightly angry. They are being driven into deeper housing poverty, while the elite moves in on their space. They are being driven out of their city, and they are being ignored. While people invest in their assets and purchase their commuter and second homes, my local families are cooped up in unsuitable, cramped and damp housing. York, which calls itself a human rights city, is the most inequitable city outside London, and this latest development will simply make it worse.

The Lib Dem-Tory council's plan just supports corporate greed over local need, and it must be changed. That will start with a Labour council, which will build the housing that our city desperately needs. It will put right the local economy by ensuring that we have the skills our city needs. We need 500 people in the NHS, and there are also those needed in the care workforce, but they cannot afford to live in our city. We will relive the dream that Joseph Rowntree planted in our city as he built the houses fit for heroes and the housing developments that set the agenda for the garden villages and sustainable green homes that will ensure people across our city can live in and enjoy our city. Labour will make the difference in York: it is time for change.

6.53 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): This has been a short but good debate—quality not quantity. We have heard from Members across the country from the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). To pick out a few, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) spoke with great authority, as always, about the need for real revenue funding and for a substantial change in the private rented sector. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) was absolutely right that we should look at locked-in discounts for first-time buyers. He will be pleased to hear that this is indeed a Labour policy, and if he votes Labour at the next election, his idea may well come to fruition. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) talked about the need to tackle climate change through housing and how important the role of modular housing is.

The Government are not just failing to address the housing crisis; they are actively making it worse. I do not know whether it is incompetence, mismanagement, complacency or deliberate policy, but this Government are wilfully exacerbating the housing crisis. Whether it is homelessness, private renting, leasehold, home ownership or fire safety, the story is always the same: things are getting worse, not better. The problems can be traced to

[Sarah Jones]

bad Government policies. In government, Labour managed to successfully tackle these issues. As a Government in waiting, Labour is the party with the solutions to these problems.

Things are getting worse, not better. Rough sleeping has doubled. We heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) that rough sleeping has gone up by 333% and that someone is dying every fortnight. Only 6,500 homes for social rent were built last year. Home ownership is supposed to be the thing the Conservative party cares about, but nearly 1 million young people are unable to access it. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) was absolutely right to talk about the overwhelming sense of injustice felt by leaseholders.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) talked eloquently about the plight of permitted development—something the Government want to increase. The problems can be traced right back to the Government. Ministers have stretched the term “affordable housing” to breaking point, to include homes that are let at up to 80% of market rents. We are building the wrong homes, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said.

The Government have repeatedly ignored fire safety advice that sprinklers are essential. They have also ignored advice following the Lakanal House and Grenfell Tower fires and refused to intervene in other blocks with aluminium composite material cladding. We have 40,000 people still trapped in deadly buildings. We have also lost more than 170,000 affordable council homes through poorly designed policies.

In government, Labour managed to successfully tackle these issues. As a Government in waiting, Labour is the party with the answers to solve these problems and the ability to deliver the change we need. It is the Government’s job to solve the housing crisis, and it is the Government’s shame that they have failed. This country has a right to expect better, which it will get under a Labour Government.

6.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): This has been a really excellent debate. I have this wonderful speech here, which is obviously way too long, so we are not going to worry about that. The contributions made by so many people in the House make it clear why housing is the No. 1 domestic priority for the Government. We all want Brexit done, so please vote for the deal, and then we can get on with dealing with this stuff.

The important thing to me is talking about community land trusts, as my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) did, and sorting out what we are going to do in the private rented sector, with the changes to electrical standards and carbon monoxide—

John Healey: We were speaking about that three years ago.

Mrs Wheeler: That is why it is important that it is coming through. The important thing here is that the guidance is coming through now, and there has been great respect for that, which I am very pleased about.

I am appalled at the way in which issues are turned into political footballs. There is no stronger Department in trying to deal with such issues one by one, in a logical way, so that nobody ends up sleeping rough or dying on our streets. The important thing is that the Government totally get this. We are spending an awful lot of money to change things around, because that is what is important. People out there realise that changes are being made in the private rented sector, changes are being made for tenants, and changes are being made to professionalise the professional services—the letting agents and managing agents. Leasehold changes are on the way. There are all sorts of things in our country that are wrong; they need to change, and it is this Government who are going to change them.

I am delighted that our ministerial team is on the case, looking at how many houses we need to build in the year; looking at giving councils the freedoms to build more council houses; encouraging social housing to grow; encouraging first-time buyers; encouraging veterans to get on the housing ladder once they leave the armed forces; making sure that veterans are not sleeping rough and that they get the help they need; and looking after people in Scotland, where there are innovative ideas—I looked at rough sleeping issues and Housing First in Glasgow. All these ideas are very important to the Government; no one should be left under any illusion about the fact that only the Government are making the changes that will get these things right.

People’s lives are at risk. People’s happiness is at risk. We want to make sure that fairness is sorted out for the future. I pay huge tribute to the teams of civil servants that are going round the country making sure that people get the help they need. In Medway and Cornwall, there has been a 40% reduction in rough sleepers. These are huge changes, and I am very proud of what the Government are doing.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Business without Debate

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 10, there shall be no sittings in Westminster Hall in the week commencing Monday 15 April.—(*Mike Freer.*)

Mental Health Support: Young People

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

7 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I applied for this debate because of the cases of young people struggling to receive mental health support in my constituency of High Peak and in the county of Derbyshire. However, since last week, when the debate was announced, hundreds of parents, support workers, teachers and young people themselves have contacted me from across the country with heartbreaking stories of young people suffering with little or no support.

Their families suffer, too: like the mum of an 11-year-old boy in my constituency who has been severely mentally ill since last September. He suffers from panic attacks and his mum says he hardly eats or sleeps. He is unable to leave the house. He is very depressed and anxious all the time, and has been destructive and suicidal on many occasions. Mental health services will not support him, in spite of a referral from the GP, because they will not do home visits for a boy who is too ill to leave the house.

There is the six-year-old who is at risk of being excluded from school due to his behaviour. He has suspected attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autistic spectrum disorder, but 18 months after referral the family are still waiting. Without a diagnosis, he can get neither the health nor education support he so desperately needs. His mum is trying online courses in child behavioural psychology, but she cannot help him without a diagnosis to access the medication and/or therapy he needs. The stories are similar from around the country and I thank all the people who have contacted me on this issue.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Does my hon. Friend agree that young people with autism who have mental health problems and their families have particular challenges in accessing appropriate services? Does she agree that Ministers need to look specifically at the needs of young people with autism who also have mental health problems? My experience in my constituency is that access to emergency support when there is a real crisis is often non-existent or inappropriate. There is then the question of transition for young people from being a teenager to being an adult. Does she agree that that needs a distinct approach?

Ruth George: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There are so many areas of children's mental health where support is needed, but with ASD a diagnosis is needed as well, which can delay the support they so desperately need.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I did seek her permission to do so beforehand. I congratulate her on bringing this issue to the House today for an Adjournment debate. It is a critical issue and we are all very aware of it. Does she agree that the world young people face today, in which they have little privacy and so much exposure, is just so difficult? There is no place to go to get out of the reach of bullies or social media. This pressure sees so many young people struggling with self-esteem and self-worth. There must be more early intervention support for these

young people to provide affirmation and tools for parents to help at an early stage and not let self-harming or suicidal thoughts begin.

Ruth George: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I will come on to some of the additional stresses that young people are facing at the moment.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I met the Teenage Cancer Trust, which talked about young cancer victims who have mental health problems. They, too, do not have enough support, so I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate.

Ruth George: I agree.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab) *rose*—

Ruth George: I have personal family experience of this, as does my right hon. Friend.

Mark Tami: Does my hon. Friend agree that with cancer, we cannot treat just the physical illness? We need to treat the mental side of dealing with it. That needs to be part and parcel of treatment and not just some sort of add-on that people seek afterwards.

Ruth George: I absolutely agree with both my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). I know that even long after the physical experience of cancer has left young people, children and adults, the mental scars can linger, particularly for families.

The number of children and young people overall with a mental health disorder has increased to nearly one in eight, according to the children and young people prevalence survey in November. That is around 1.25 million young people, yet only one in four young people with a mental disorder is seen by a mental health specialist. Over 400,000 children and young people are not getting any professional help at all in England—that is almost 1,000 young people and their families suffering in every one of our constituencies. The lack of support leads to their condition worsening.

In 2017, 46.8% of young people with a mental health disorder had self-harmed or attempted suicide at some point, and over a quarter of 11 to 16-year-olds. The threshold to access child and adolescent mental health services has become so high that local teachers in my constituency are asked to provide evidence that a child has sought to take their life before a referral will be accepted. It is not enough to be told that they have tried to take their own life—CAMHS wants evidence, and these are schools with children up to the age of 16. Even when young people are accepted, the waiting time for treatment from CAMHS in my constituency is over 12 months, and sometimes 18 months. That is not unusual. It is no wonder that children are driven to more and more desperate measures just to get heard.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some powerful points in a powerful speech. I speak as the father of four children between the ages of 22 and 11. Any family in the modern era has to face these problems. Does she agree that parents need more support to understand these issues and to learn how to deal with them more effectively to try to help our children?

Ruth George: As a parent of four children aged between nine and 27, I agree that there are strains from modern life, but when parents need support, they find it far too difficult to access.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The waiting times in York are also horrendous. The funding, which has, in fact, gone down in the last year, is just £40 per child. Is not that so insufficient to match need?

Ruth George: Absolutely. It will not surprise my hon. Friend to hear that I will come to the issue of funding later, but that is a chronically low figure for the number of young people and children who are suffering.

The number of suicides of teenagers has risen by two thirds since 2010. I pay tribute to my constituent, who says that she is too scared to leave her 14-year-old daughter alone anymore. Having seen her daughter try to take her own life using paracetamol, my constituent is campaigning for the sale of paracetamol to under 16-year-olds to be banned. I ask the Minister to look into that.

We should do what we can to prevent access to the means for young people to take their own lives, but even more, we should look at stemming the reasons why they are driven to such desperation and making sure that treatment can reach them far earlier. Our children are suffering under the weight of demands at the same time as the people who have always been there to support them are disappearing.

Young people suffer from exam pressure, driven by school league tables. An 11-year-old in my constituency, who had always been perfectly happy and is incredibly intelligent, had a panic attack before his standard assessment tests. He said that the children knew that if they did not do well in their exams, their small village school could be driven to close through a lack of parents applying for places. Pressures on children aged 10 and 11 are just too much. My secondary schools say that children come to them in year 7 bearing such a weight of emotional stress that it is almost impossible to support.

There are higher numbers of children with special needs at our schools and less support for them as school cuts bite. There are exclusions from schools, with thousands of children taken off the roll. With fewer support staff in our schools, there is more opportunity for bullying. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, social media enables the continuation of that bullying throughout the day and the night.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware of the work that I have been doing—indeed, with the Minister—on social media and the need for more research into it to gain understanding. She mentioned the data on increased self-harm and suicide. Another correlation is that, in the past decade, social media use has rocketed and that is having an impact on our young people. The Government and the devolved Administrations need to conduct more research on the impact of social media so that we can look at early intervention and, where possible, prevention, to support young people who are addicted to social media platforms.

Ruth George: Absolutely. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work on the matter. I hope that the Government will take up the recommendations in the

report that the all-party group on social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing, which he chairs, has produced.

We are seeing not just online but physical bullying, and rising violent crime, especially among young people. I spoke to teenagers at a college yesterday who told me that they are actually scared of the gangs of 13 and 14-year-olds who roam the streets in my area. Of course, young people are more likely to be victims of violent crime than anyone else.

Even in quiet rural areas such as mine, county lines gangs put pressure on more and more teenagers to become involved in crime. When I visited my local youth centre and talked to teenagers there, they said that, for one night a week, it is the one place they can go to escape the gangs and their peers who put pressure on them to get involved in drugs, aged just 13 and 14.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ruth George: I really need to make progress—I am sorry.

At the same time, more parents are working longer hours and spending more time travelling to work. We have the longest commuting times in Europe. Those parents have less time to spend with their children. There are more demands for flexibility from employers, especially at weekends, in the evenings and in school holidays—the times that parents most need to spend with their children.

There are new demands from the state for parents to be in full-time work, whether to access free childcare places from age three or through the demands of universal credit from age 12. At the same time as parents are working harder and longer, there is an increase in child and family poverty. Increasing numbers of parents face money worries and debt and have to visit food banks—strains that their children all too often see.

Alongside all those pressures on families and our young people, the number of professionals who are there to support them is reducing. Class sizes in schools are increasing and there are fewer teaching assistants, so school staff have less time for each child and growing pressures to prove academic achievement. Our schools do a fantastic job and I pay tribute to the staff who go above and beyond to support the young people in their care, but they cannot help with the sustained, one-to-one counselling and professional support that is so often needed. On top of that, child and adolescent mental health services have huge waiting lists and are still underfunded.

Our clinical commissioning groups spend 14% of their budget on mental health, but just 0.9% on children's mental health. Even when the Government put additional funding into CCGs, it was not ring-fenced and, too often, not spent. Although an extra £250 million a year was allocated to CAMHS, in the first year only 36% of CCGs increased their spending by as much as that allocation. In the following year, 2016-17, only half of them did so, and last year, 2017-18, the spending stayed roughly the same. In 2018-19, it increased by just £50 million. Only a small fraction of the £1.25 billion that the Government had invested in children's mental health services and CAMHS actually reached the front line.

CCGs are under huge pressures. Derbyshire's CCGs have had to cut their spending by £51 million this year, and, despite the promised extra £20 billion for the NHS, they face further spending cuts of £270 million over the next four years. Mental health services are on the target list. The number of psychiatrists working in CAMHS at all levels fell by 3.7% between 2011 and 2018, although the number of referrals has almost doubled, as has the number of children admitted to A&E with mental health problems. At the same time, councils are cutting their spending.

School nurses spend a great deal of time supporting families and young people on the CAMHS waiting list who are going through the agonising wait of 12 to 18 months while experiencing suicidal thoughts, but they too are being subjected to cuts because of cuts in public health spending. We are losing half our school nurses in Derbyshire. As for "early help" support for families, 200 staff are being made redundant, and there is nowhere for families to turn for support. At all levels, support services are being underfunded. The Government have made a commitment to providing more counsellors in schools, which is often the right place for them, as children may need access to support. However, the target of extra provision in just a quarter of schools in five years' time is not good enough. Our children are being failed, and their families are being failed.

Investment in mental health support for young people would actually save the Government money—not just in the health service, which would be able to nip mental health problems in the bud, but in the education, social services and criminal justice sectors. Our young people are crying out for help. The Government have some laudable aims in the 10-year plan, but they have not enough concrete plans to implement those aims, to fund CCGs to deliver them, or to invest in the training of the staff who will be on the front line.

The huge number of people who have contacted Parliament, and me personally, about this debate shows how much concern exists out there about the terrible cases of young people who are driven past the point of despair and the families whose lives are turned upside down. This is a cry for help on behalf of all of them. I ask the Minister please to listen, and to tell us how the Government will act.

7.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for her speech. She spoke with characteristic passion and sincerity about an important matter that concerns many Members, which is why so many are here tonight. I have personally engaged with a number of them on these issues.

Let me say at the outset that I am not complacent about the challenges that confront us when it comes to children's mental health. It is true that many young people find it difficult to obtain help when they need it. I readily acknowledge that we face the challenge of decades of underfunding of treatment for mental ill health, in addition to the societal challenges that have made the problem more acute. It is clearly a priority for the Government, but unfortunately we cannot solve it with just a click of the fingers. We need to reinvest in the workforce if we are to deliver the services that are needed.

However, I hope to give the hon. Lady some reassurance about the direction of travel. I hope to reassure her that we will tackle the most acute needs while at the same time investing in the upfront prevention which, as she rightly pointed out, will save the Government money—and not only in the NHS, where there will be less demand for acute mental health services. She is right to highlight the savings that could be made in the criminal justice system. We must achieve the earliest of early interventions if we are really to make a difference, and not just for those people who need support, but for society, and that lies at the heart of my approach.

Mark Tami: Does the Minister not realise that young people actually have to try to kill themselves before they become a priority? Surely that is wrong. Early intervention is the key and we must not wait until young people reach that terrible stage before intervening.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will be reassured to hear that I do not think that is good enough. I have heard anecdotal evidence that that has been said to a number of people. Clearly it is a matter of clinical judgment when people are referred to mental health services; we just need to ensure that happens. If he has specific examples, I would be happy to investigate them.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Mental health is raised with me time and again by my constituents, both young people and parents, in Clackmannanshire and in Perth and Kinross. Can my hon. Friend explain to the House how we can help champion the 111 crisis line, which is available UK-wide? It can be pre-emptive, because a young person can dial it on their mobile phone and get immediate support. Sometimes that pressure release valve is exactly what is needed.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Just as we have the 999 service for physical health emergencies, we need the same provision for mental health emergencies, and that is what we intend to deliver through the 111 service. That is a clear ambition articulated in the forward plan.

Rachael Maskell: The Minister said that this is a matter of clinical judgment, but clinicians are unable to make those choices if they lack the necessary staff and resources.

Jackie Doyle-Price: There will be cases when it comes down to a clinical decision on whether a referral to a mental health professional is needed. However, we need to ensure that mental wellbeing is embedded throughout our health services.

Ruth George: In my area CAMHS are supposed to accept referrals from some of the young people on level 2—that indicates their level of need—and all of the young people on levels 3 and 4. As it is, they do not have time to accept even those children on level 4, which has the highest priority. That is a result of resources, not clinical judgment.

Jackie Doyle-Price: That is not borne out by the figures from the Derby and Derbyshire clinical commissioning group, which show that 31% of children

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

and young people with mental health needs were seen by NHS-funded mental health services. I come back to the point that it is not acceptable for children to be told that they are not yet ill enough to receive treatment, which is why we are investing in more provision. We expect at least an additional 345,000 children and young people aged 16 to 25 to be able to access more direct support.

Mr Ivan Lewis: I have to say to the Minister that in this area there is a massive gap between the rhetoric and the reality on the frontline. I urge her to reconsider the whole concept of ring-fencing resources. When we have Cinderella services such as CAMHS, unless the Government decide to ring-fence that funding and insist that local commissioners give it to frontline services, they will never achieve the changes they are seeking.

Jackie Doyle-Price: In the past we have treated ring fences as a ceiling and set CCGs the clear objective that they need to increase investment in CAMHS by more than what we have been giving them. [Interruption.] However, acknowledging the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), we will look at what more control we can give, and NHS England is keeping a very close eye on how that money is being spent. As I said at the outset, I am not complacent about the challenges we face. I have to say that we are on it. Direction of travel is one thing, but we have to make sure that we are managing expectations and that we can deliver the services that people expect. That includes investment in the workforce to deliver on very clear expectations.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): My hon. Friend is being characteristically generous in giving way. I would like to give her some feedback from Cornwall, where our CCG is spending more money on mental health services and I am seeing those services grow. Does she agree, however, that simple organisational changes can sometimes help? I have two universities in my constituency, Exeter and Falmouth. When young people leave home for the first time and arrive at university, it can take months for the NHS to get their records and services sorted out, but young people with existing poor mental health conditions need those services to be in place when they arrive.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Transition is clearly an area that we need to address, and she is right to highlight the importance of this in universities.

The hon. Member for High Peak made a number of points in her speech. She referred to people with ADHD and ASD, and I could not agree with her more that there is a real issue with the failure to diagnose people with those conditions early enough. We know that those people are more likely to suffer from mental ill health, so early diagnosis is absolutely crucial if we are to equip those young people with the tools to look after themselves. I am pleased that that has been a target in the forward plan that we will roll out. The hon. Lady also rightly highlighted the issues surrounding county lines and knife crime, and there is no doubt that the increased incidence of trauma in communities will bring with it more demand for mental health services. That is something that we are very much tackling as part of the Prime Minister's summit, which took place just last week.

I have been very pleased to work with the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on this, and I welcome his all-party parliamentary group's report on the impact of social media. The impact of social media brings with it a whole new set of pressures on children's and young people's mental health. It brings greater intensity to relationships, for example. We think our children are safe in their bedrooms, but they are not necessarily, and we need to be vigilant about how we hold social media and internet providers accountable for the content that they host on their sites.

Jim Shannon: The Childline charity has reported a 30% increase in referrals in the past year. That is an indication of the pressure being put on our children. Has the Minister had an opportunity to speak to Childline?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I have not had that opportunity yet, but I am sure I will.

I could say an awful lot more, but I do not have much time remaining. It is clear from hon. Members' contributions to the debate that we all recognise that this is perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing our young people right now. It is heartening to see that so many people are really seizing those challenges, whether by demanding better services or by asking for changes to Government policy to deal with some of the threats. That is all very welcome, and I have no doubt that all Members will continue to challenge me on this important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Wednesday 10 April 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: No Deal

1. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the potential effect on Northern Ireland of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [910246]

12. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the potential effect on Northern Ireland of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [910257]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): Today is the 21st anniversary of the Belfast agreement. Our commitment to the agreement and its successor agreements remains steadfast. It has been instrumental in bringing peace and stability to Northern Ireland and remains the bedrock of the significant progress that has been achieved since 1998.

We want and expect to leave the European Union with a negotiated agreement. However, as a responsible Government, we have been working intensively to ensure that all parts of the UK, including Northern Ireland, are as prepared as possible in the event of a no-deal exit. We have been clear that the unique social, political and economic circumstances of Northern Ireland must be protected.

Jeff Smith: May I echo the Secretary of State's words about the Belfast agreement?

Organised crime does not stop at the border, and the European arrest warrant is a vital tool in modern policing. What discussion has the Secretary of State had with the Home Secretary to ensure that we retain this crucial means of tackling crime in all circumstances of leaving the EU?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the European arrest warrant is vital, and it is used in Northern Ireland perhaps more than in any other part of the United Kingdom. It is a very important tool that the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the security services need to have access to. There is, of course, a way to make sure that they have access to it, and that is to leave with a deal.

Liz Twist: As the Secretary of State has said, the Good Friday agreement was signed 21 years ago today, and it was a landmark achievement of the Labour Government. It ensured ongoing equality between those

in Northern Ireland who consider themselves British or Irish. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, those rights will need additional protection. What plans does the Secretary of State have to ensure that those vital rights are undiluted and protected for all in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: The Belfast/Good Friday agreement was a landmark achievement. It took many years and many people take credit for it, and quite rightly so. We have been clear that there will be no diminution of rights when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. That is set out very clearly in the Northern Ireland protocol to the withdrawal agreement, which means, as I said earlier, that the answer is to vote for the deal.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy that cutting corporation tax to the level enjoyed by businesses in the Republic of Ireland would more than compensate for any loss of attractiveness of Northern Ireland to foreign direct investors and the associated job losses?

Karen Bradley: This House gave the Northern Ireland Executive the power to cut the corporation tax rate. That is an achievement of this Government, and we believe it would help the economy of Northern Ireland. We need a functioning Executive—we will come on to that issue later—for that power to be used, and that is what we all want to happen.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that there are already differential rates of duties and VAT between Northern Ireland and the Republic and that, whether we leave with a deal or no deal, co-operation and ensuring that there is no hard border is in everyone's interests?

Karen Bradley: I agree that it is in everyone's interests that we co-operate with all our friends in the European Union, and in particular with Ireland. My hon. Friend is right. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom—a separate jurisdiction and a separate sovereign country—and therefore there are differences. As I have said, the best way for us to leave the European Union—the way that will protect so many of the things that have been achieved in the past 21 years—is to leave with a negotiated agreement.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Of course everybody wants to get a deal that can get through this House of Commons. I remind the Secretary of State that she, along with us and Members from her own party, voted for an amendment saying that the backstop had to be replaced with alternative arrangements. Will she confirm that she still stands by that, and will she encourage her right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to adopt that approach, which the Leader of the House referred to yesterday?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman is right to point out that there was a majority—the only majority in this House for anything—for the Brady amendment. I was one of those who voted for it, because I want to see changes to the backstop. Of course, that is something we have achieved through the agreement that alternative

arrangements could be part of the way in which the backstop is replaced. As I have said, we all want a negotiated exit that works for the whole United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland.

Nigel Dodds: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for confirming on the record in the House today that she agrees that changes do need to be made to the backstop—it is important to recognise that. With regard to a no-deal outcome, she will have heard the Irish Taoiseach, and indeed Michel Barnier, say that in the event of no deal there will not be any hard border on the island of Ireland and that arrangements will be made to ensure that checks and controls are made operationally away from the border. Does she understand the frustration, therefore, with people who say that, in the event of no deal, there will be no hard border, but who are insisting on a backstop, which could actually bring about the conditions that they say they want to avoid?

Karen Bradley: I understand the many frustrations that there are around this process. I voted for the withdrawal agreement—I voted for it three times. I believe that it is a fair and balanced way for the whole United Kingdom to leave the European Union in a way that respects fully the Belfast agreement and its successor agreements, and that is what I want to see us deliver.

Devolution

2. **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What recent steps she has taken to help restore devolution in Northern Ireland. [910247]

10. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What recent steps she has taken to help restore devolution in Northern Ireland. [910255]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): On 26 March, I laid before Parliament a statutory instrument that extends the period for Executive formation until 25 August. This follows the recent engagement that I have had with the five main political parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government. On the basis of those conversations, I have proposed a short, focused set of five-party talks aimed at restoring devolution and the other institutions at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Sweeney: I think it is fair to say that the Secretary of State has lost the confidence of many political leaders in Northern Ireland over recent months, so will she at least concede that she is probably not the best person to be chairing those talks? Will she repeat the best practice of previous Secretaries of State and appoint an independent chair to lead those talks on restoring devolution in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks, but I do want to look at what is the best way to achieve a successful outcome from the talks, and I am open to looking at all options for how to achieve that.

David Hanson: In the absence of local rule and the absence of direct rule there remains a vacuum. Will the Secretary of State now look at the possibility of Members

of this House asking written questions about issues of devolved responsibility to give some accountability to the local civil service?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman, who has considerable experience in this field and who will, I am determined, remain the last direct rule Minister, knows that there are some constitutional arrangements. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 was very carefully drafted so that it respected the separation and independence of the Northern Ireland civil service, and we mess with that at our peril.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend set a timetable for these talks so that she can bring the various leaders together and make sure that we restore devolved government?

Karen Bradley: I would like to see talks resume as soon as possible, but I am acutely aware that there are issues, including the fact that local government elections are now being fought in Northern Ireland and that we are in purdah, that create difficulties for what can be achieved, but I do want to see as soon as possible a short, focused set of five-party talks.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Secretary of State has previously said that formal talks could not take place until after the local elections on 2 May, which she has just referred to, but given the Brexit developments, or a lack thereof, is she now proposing that all-party talks will now not happen until after the European elections at the end of May, which would bring us into the heart of the marching season? How can she possibly justify yet another delay in attempting to restore the Assembly that nearly 80% of the Northern Irish public are crying out for?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman refers to a number of issues that may be making it more difficult for parties to find an accommodation to enable them to restore devolution. I know that he is a supporter of devolution, and therefore I suggest to him that the best way that we can all help on that is to vote for the deal.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): More than two years ago, Sinn Féin collapsed the Northern Ireland Assembly. Since then, rather than looking for its restoration, it has been fixated on getting a border poll and on stirring up sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland at the expense of people who want decisions made on education, health, infrastructure, job promotion and so on. In the face of Sinn Féin opposition to setting up the Assembly again, what plans has the Secretary of State considered to get decisions made in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman knows that the best thing for the people of Northern Ireland is devolved government in Stormont, with local politicians making decisions for the people who elected them. That is what we are all determined to see, and I am as determined as anybody to make sure that I put the conditions in place so that we can enable that to happen.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): May I join the Secretary of State in commemorating the 21st anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday agreement? One of the

casualties of the lack of devolved governance is the compensation scheme recommended by Sir Anthony Hart some five years ago. In the time since that report, 30 victims of historical institutional abuse have died. Only one person can now resolve the issue, rather than pushing it further down the road. Let me make a heartfelt plea to the Secretary of State. Will she now announce to the House that she will take the power to ensure that compensation is paid and announce a date when those compensation payments will begin?

Karen Bradley: I do not wish to correct the hon. Gentleman unnecessarily, but the recommendations of the Hart inquiry came two years ago, just after the Executive collapsed. Since that time, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, David Sterling, has completed a consultation, and we await its results; that would need to be done in any event. I stand ready to look at the appropriate action that needs to be taken when the consultation recommendations are brought forward and I hear from David Sterling.

Devolved Government

3. **Ross Thomson** (Aberdeen South) (Con): What progress she has made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910248]

5. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): What progress she has made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910250]

7. **Kirstene Hair** (Angus) (Con): What progress she has made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910252]

9. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What discussions she has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) representatives of political parties in Northern Ireland on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910254]

11. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What progress she has made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [910256]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): As I set out previously, the statutory instrument that I laid before Parliament on 26 March extends the period for Executive formation until 25 August. I have proposed a short, focused set of five-party talks aimed at restoring devolution at the earliest opportunity.

Ross Thomson: Given that the Secretary of State has previously stated that she wishes to ensure the best chance of restoring devolution, is she concerned that no opportunity to successfully bring the parties together has yet presented itself?

Karen Bradley: We have tried on a number of occasions to bring the parties together. My hon. Friend will know that we had an intensive period of talks last year that were very close to a successful outcome, but it has just not been possible to do that. I would not wish to say to the people of Northern Ireland that we were able to do something if I did not genuinely believe that we could. I

therefore need to ensure that the conditions are right to have the best chance of success, because that is what the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

Mark Menzies: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing £350 million for the Belfast city deal, but does she agree that it is vital that we do similar for Londonderry?

Karen Bradley: I was delighted to co-sign the heads of terms for the Belfast region city deal with partners last month. It is a significant milestone, which will ultimately deliver the first city deal in Northern Ireland. Let me be clear that there is no room for complacency. I have committed to delivering a comprehensive and ambitious set of city deals right across Northern Ireland, and I am now working hard with local partners and colleagues across the Government to make progress on the Derry and Strabane city deal. Negotiations are progressing well, and I am hopeful that Cabinet colleagues will be in a position to agree a deal following the conclusions of local council elections in May.

Kirstene Hair: As the Secretary of State outlined, the statutory instrument that extends the period for Executive formation in Northern Ireland runs out on 25 August. What steps will she take if we get closer to that deadline and do not see any devolved government being restored?

Karen Bradley: We are looking at all options, but clearly the only sustainable way forward for Northern Ireland lies in getting the institutions back up and running. The restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland is my absolute priority, and the willingness to restore the Executive is there among the political parties. I will do everything in my power to get the Executive back up and running as soon as possible.

Maria Caulfield: Given that Northern Ireland has now reached the world record for the longest period ever without a Government, would the Minister consider forming an Assembly of the willing to return devolved government to Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: We remain steadfast in our commitment to the Belfast agreement and its successors, including the provisions setting out an inclusive, power-sharing Government. An approach that excludes representatives of either part of the community is not a sustainable way forward for Northern Ireland.

Alan Mak: In the absence of Ministers at Stormont, how has my right hon. Friend engaged with public authorities and local authorities in Northern Ireland to ensure political stability and good governance?

Karen Bradley: As I have said, I have already laid the SI to extend the period during which an Executive can be formed. We need to ensure that we are doing everything we can to get the politicians back into Stormont, running devolved government for the people of Northern Ireland, but of course I work closely with local councils and others—including on city deals, as I set out earlier.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State outline for the House what fresh thinking or fresh ideas she has to try to break the impasse we have had for well over two years now?

Karen Bradley: As I said earlier, I rule nothing out. I am looking at all the options that are available in terms of getting the conditions right and getting those successful talks. If the hon. Gentleman has any suggestions, I would be very grateful to receive them. I rule nothing out. I will of course let this House know at the earliest opportunity when I do have developments in that area.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP) *rose*—

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: There is always a DUP contest between seniority and youth. On this occasion, I call Mr David Simpson.

David Simpson: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

With all the discussions that the Secretary of State has had with the various parties, I am sure she has come to the conclusion that the only party that is holding progress back is Sinn Féin. We in this part of the House would form a Government in the morning.

Karen Bradley: You are probably not aware, Mr Speaker, that I managed to offend the hon. Gentleman in the Tea Room earlier, so I will point out that you allowed youth to win on this occasion.

Of course I have met all the party leaders and all the main parties in Northern Ireland. I do believe that there is a willingness to see devolution restored, and I want to see that at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I call Gavin Robinson.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker—I will always defer to my junior colleagues. The Secretary of State knows that four of the five parties in Northern Ireland would restore the Executive tomorrow, without preconditions. Sinn Féin is the only party that has allowed its political prejudice to get in the way of progress in Northern Ireland. Will she commit, at the end of the time-bound period of discussions, to call the Assembly and put the parties to the test?

Karen Bradley: As I say, I want to see devolution restored at the earliest opportunity. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments about the willingness of his party. I am convinced that the other four parties are determined to see devolution restored, and we need to get the conditions right to allow that to happen.

14. [910259] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent assessment has the Secretary of State made of the extra-budgetary payment to Northern Ireland agreed between her Government and the DUP on the devolution settlement? Does she realise that Scotland and its people have been denied a total of £3.4 billion as a direct result of this dodgy deal, which may have broken the Barnett formula?

Karen Bradley: I do not think it is right for the hon. Lady to make that assertion. There are unique circumstances and pressures in Northern Ireland. The Government respect that and want to make sure that it is reflected in the financial settlement.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In the absence of devolved government, the direct decisions being made by Westminster for Northern Ireland are increasing every day, whether on the Offensive Weapons Bill, the Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill, the two-child policy, or even what will happen with the Open golf tournament. The Secretary of State tells us that she respects devolution, but these decisions are being made behind closed doors with civil servants and without the involvement of the people or representatives of Northern Ireland. If she thinks that is acceptable, will she publish in full a list of all the policy decisions she has made under this new legislation, including the legislative consent motions and who has signed them off, so that we know who is really running Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady did very well to get through the question and still have some voice left.

The decisions that are taken by the civil servants in Northern Ireland—the permanent secretaries—are published. That is part of the conditions of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018. But to be clear, that Act does not allow new major policy decisions to be made; it allows for policy decisions taken when the Executive was still in place to be continued. As I say, no new policy decisions are being taken under that Act.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Devolution and peace in Northern Ireland are precious and hard won. That is brilliantly captured with great humour and poignancy in the latest series of “Derry Girls”, which I know the Secretary of State is a fan of. Will she join me in congratulating Lisa McGee and the entire production team on another brilliant series?

Karen Bradley: I am absolutely delighted to congratulate everybody involved in “Derry Girls”. I have not yet seen the final episode, so I do not want any spoilers.

Universal Credit

4. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the two-child limit in universal credit on families in Northern Ireland.

[910249]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): Both the Secretary of State and I were delighted by the recent announcement by the Work and Pensions Secretary that parents who had their third child before the two-child limit was introduced in April 2017 would not face the cap. This will help thousands of families across the UK, including Northern Ireland. The administration and implementation of universal credit is a devolved matter, but Northern Ireland's Department for Communities knows of no complaints, issues or problems experienced by claimants in the operation of the two-child policy.

Dr Huq: The cruelty of this policy, as was confirmed by the UN rapporteur, is most acute in Northern Ireland, where families are bigger and abortion is illegal, which has been condemned by the Supreme Court. Surely in the case of non-consensual conception, women who

seek to exercise the already humiliating rape clause will risk the prosecution of professionals who assist under section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967. Can we have some clarity on this human rights double whammy?

John Penrose: The hon. Lady is right to raise that concern, which has been raised on previous occasions because of the depth of worry. I would just reassure her that in the 52 years since section 5 was passed, there have been no prosecutions for failure to report a rape in Northern Ireland. I would add that an outgoing Director of Public Prosecutions in Northern Ireland said that it is very unlikely that anyone will face prosecution in future.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The Minister appears to be presenting some new legislation to us. We are not familiar with the information he has just given, and I hope we can have a bit more detail.

I rise in sorrow and in anger to say that the roll-out of universal credit has had an unmitigated devastating impact on the poorest people in Northern Ireland. If universal credit is not good enough for the Minister's constituents or my constituents, why is it good enough for Northern Ireland, where the level of long-term unemployment is twice the national average? Does he believe that making the worst-off worse off is acceptable?

John Penrose: I politely disagree with the hon. Gentleman, not least because unemployment in Northern Ireland has been falling steadily, which is one of the huge success stories of Northern Ireland's economic progress since the troubles. The previous Assembly introduced some rather important legislation, which is still in operation, that mitigates some of the local concerns about the operation of universal credit in Northern Ireland.

Security Situation

6. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [910251]

13. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [910258]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): The threat from dissident republican terrorism continues to be severe in Northern Ireland. Our top priority is to keep people safe and secure. Vigilance against this continuing threat is essential and we remain determined to ensure that terrorism never succeeds.

Vicky Ford: It is 21 years to the day since the signing of the Belfast Good Friday agreement. I will always remember the devastating bomb that ripped through Omagh, the town of my birth, just months before. Does my hon. Friend agree that the agreement has been vital in delivering the relative peace in Northern Ireland and that it must not be jeopardised?

John Penrose: I do. As the Secretary of State rightly mentioned earlier, the Belfast agreement was a landmark moment for Northern Ireland and all its neighbours. The peace that it has helped deliver is the foundation of

so much of the economic and social progress that has been made since. Of course, the terrorists know that, which is why it is essential that we never let them win.

Victoria Prentis: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Police Service of Northern Ireland does a fantastic job? Will he confirm that the Government will continue to do all they can to support it?

John Penrose: Yes, I do. The Police Service of Northern Ireland does a terrific job of keeping everyone safe across the community in Northern Ireland. I am sure I speak for everybody here in expressing our admiration and thanks for the work it does.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. [Interruption.] I am very glad that the Prime Minister has just taken her seat, because the question relates to dissident republicans. Has the Minister been made aware by the Police Service of Northern Ireland that dissident republicans are responsible for the recent spate of thefts of ATMs across Northern Ireland and are intent on using the stolen money to purchase weaponry to attack police officers and others along the border in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

John Penrose: There has been a great deal of speculation about this matter. I hope the hon. Lady will understand that all I can say in my response here is that policing is an operational matter. There are ongoing live police investigations into this matter and therefore I cannot go any further into it. However, I am sure that everybody here will have heard her concerns and registered them clearly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that the Secretary of State made a statement saying that the threat level for January was at "severe", will the Minister outline what efforts have been made to increase police presence in local community policing to build relationships within communities? How much extra funding has he secured for the police?

John Penrose: I am happy to report that there has been a great deal of extra funding for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. There was £230 million of extra security funding over the 2010 Parliament and there has been £131 million over the current spending review period, plus £25 million to tackle paramilitary activity. In December, we announced another £16.5 million to help the Police Service of Northern Ireland prepare for EU exit.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What action are the Government taking to tackle delays in the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland? That is essential to ensuring we do more to bring to justice people responsible for terrorism.

John Penrose: My right hon. Friend, as a former Secretary of State, will appreciate that that is predominantly a devolved matter and that many things would be on the plate of a restored Stormont Assembly and Executive. I am sure that that would be one of them, but first it is essential to get that Executive and Assembly back to work.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): In these heightened times of threats against politicians, anyone standing for a council election in England this May does not need to have their home details published. In Northern Ireland, that is not the case, which has led to the Social Democratic and Labour party councillor Máiría Cahill having to withdraw from fighting her seat. Will the Minister tell the House why in England legislation changed but we did not do that in Northern Ireland? When will that change be made?

John Penrose: This matter has come up in the press recently and I know it is causing concern to all parts of the House and in all communities in Northern Ireland. We are tremendously sympathetic. The difficulty is that changing the laws in Northern Ireland in time for the local elections will probably be impossible. We all want to try to ensure that this is dealt with so that the law is in line as soon as we can.

Open Championship 2019

8. **Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the effect on Northern Ireland's economy of hosting the Open championship 2019. [910253]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): As a former tourism Minister, I am delighted that in July the Open championship is making an historic return to Northern Ireland after 68 years. Tourism Northern Ireland expects up to 190,000 spectators will attend the event at the Royal Portrush golf club and estimates that the benefit to the Northern Ireland economy will be £80 million. Tourism in Northern Ireland is going from strength to strength. During the first quarter of 2018, visitors spent an unprecedented £180 million.

Tom Pursglove: What steps is the Minister taking to capitalise on this top international sporting event to promote Northern Irish tourism and showcase business opportunities?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend will know that tourism is a devolved matter, which is yet another reason for the Stormont Executive to reform quickly. I also urge businesses to use the event as a huge marketing opportunity. Portrush will be a target-rich environment for them, full of potential customers, suppliers and contacts for all sectors of Northern Ireland's economy—not just tourism. I am sure they will grab it with both hands.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)
rose—

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman intends favourably to reference Rory McIlroy, I will call him. If he does not, I will not.

Mr Campbell: I will, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Very good.

Mr Campbell: He is one of the best golfers in the world. Will the Minister meet Invest Northern Ireland, as I have, to ensure that we maximise every potential investment opportunity on the back of the Open returning to Royal Portrush after an absence of almost 70 years?

John Penrose: I am happy to meet Invest Northern Ireland and anyone else who wants to bring more investment into Northern Ireland.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, I am pleased to announce that after a fair and open recruitment process, Her Majesty the Queen has approved the appointment of Sarah Davies as Clerk Assistant and Managing Director of the Chamber and Committees Team with effect from 29 April 2019. Sarah Davies is Principal Clerk of Select Committees and the first woman to hold permanently the position of Clerk Assistant. She is a superb servant of the House of Commons. We unite in congratulating her and we wish her well for the period that lies ahead.

Oral Answers to Questions

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [910330] **Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con):** If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 10 April.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): May I add my congratulations to Sarah Davies on achieving this position and say how good it always is to see women in high office?

The tragedy of Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 is a shameful scar on British Indian history. As Her Majesty the Queen said before visiting Jallianwala Bagh in 1997, it is a “distressing example” of our history with India. We deeply regret what happened and the suffering caused. I am pleased that today the UK-India relationship is one of collaboration, partnership, prosperity and security. Indian diaspora make an enormous contribution to British society, and I am sure the whole House wishes to see the UK's relationship with India continue to flourish.

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

Craig Tracey: I fully agree with the Prime Minister when she has repeatedly said that we need to honour both the result of the referendum and our manifesto commitments, which mean leaving the customs union and the single market. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that if the best way to do that, rather than delivering a diluted deal that is unrecognisable to many of those who voted to leave, is to go under World Trade Organisation rules, we should grab that opportunity and believe in the ability of the British people and a Conservative Government to make a success of it?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that I believe a Conservative Government will make a success of whatever the situation is in relation to Brexit. But I still believe that the best Brexit for the UK is to be able to leave in an orderly way, to be able to leave with a deal, and I want to ensure that that Brexit does indeed

honour the result of the referendum. There are Members of this House who do not want to honour the result of the referendum; I do.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am very pleased that the Prime Minister mentioned what happened in Jallianwala Bagh and the issues of the massacre at Amritsar 100 years ago. I think that the people, in memory of those who lost their lives and the brutality of what happened, deserve a full, clear and unequivocal apology for what took place on that occasion.

I join the Prime Minister and yourself, Mr Speaker, in welcoming Sarah Davies to her appointment. I am sure she is going to be absolutely brilliant. I remember the day she started work in the House, and she has done incredibly well.

I also welcome my hon. Friend the new Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) who is here today. I believe that she is a very worthy successor to the late Paul Flynn.

Today marks the 21st anniversary of the Good Friday agreement, a defining moment in Irish history, which allowed peace to prevail. It was a great achievement, and I pay tribute to the work done by the Labour Government at that time, as well as those on all sides in Ireland, north and south, and in this House in achieving the crucial breakthrough in the peace process, which we have to ensure is maintained.

As we continue discussions to find a compromise over the Brexit deal that could shape our future economic relationship with Europe—protecting jobs, rights and our economy—we should not forget the communities across this country that have been abandoned by this Government in the here and now. Official figures show that nine of the 10 most deprived council areas in this country have seen cuts that are almost three times the average of any other council. Why has the Prime Minister decided to cut the worst-off areas in our country more than the most well-off?

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Gentleman is right to reference the 21st anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which was indeed an important moment in Northern Irish history and which has led to the peace that we have seen subsequently. May I welcome the actions that were taken by politicians of all parties, in this House and elsewhere, to ensure that that peace was possible and that that agreement was possible as well?

May I say to the right hon. Gentleman in relation to the issue of council funding that actually councils do have more money available this year? [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] Yes, a real-terms increase. The right hon. Gentleman voted against that money being available. But what we have also done is listen to councils, and given them extra flexibility. For example, they have called for a long time to have the borrowing cap lifted so that they could build more homes, and we have done exactly that—listened to councils and given them what they wanted.

Jeremy Corbyn: The problem is that child poverty is rising. In councils with the highest levels of child poverty, over £1,000 per household has been taken in funding cuts in the past decade. Some of the wealthiest areas of our country have lost only £5. Take Swindon, for example, where Honda recently announced 3,500 job cuts. Child poverty is over one third higher in Swindon than it is in

Surrey, but Swindon will have lost £235 per household in Government funding cuts, whereas a household in Surrey will see more money from central Government. Can the Prime Minister explain why Swindon faces cuts while Surrey gets more money?

The Prime Minister: Actually, what we see in terms of spending power per home is that the average spending power per home for the most deprived local authorities is over 20% higher than for the least deprived local authorities. That is Conservatives delivering for local councils.

Jeremy Corbyn: Homelessness is three times higher in Swindon than in Surrey. Today, we learn that two-thirds of councils do not have the funding necessary to comply with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. In Stoke-on-Trent, the council has lost £640 per household, yet child poverty is more than double the rate in Surrey, which has seen an increase in funding. Does the Prime Minister think that areas with the highest levels of child poverty deserve to be facing the largest cuts in their budgets?

The Prime Minister: What I think is that Members across the House who are concerned about child poverty should take action to ensure that we help families to get more money into their pockets. It is this Government that have frozen fuel duty. It is this Government that have introduced the national living wage. It is this Government that have given lower paid workers the highest increase. It is this Government that on Saturday saw 32 million households see a tax cut. If the right hon. Gentleman really wants to help people out there with money in their pockets he should be backing these measures by the Government instead of voting against them.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that under this Government 500,000 more children have gone into relative poverty. In Stoke-on-Trent alone, 4,000 food bank parcels were handed out to children last year. If that was not bad enough, it is about to get worse. Tory proposals on the new funding formula for councils will make poorer areas even poorer. They are removing the word “deprivation” from the funding criteria. In a phrase that George Orwell would have been very proud of they have called this the fairer funding formula. Areas like Stoke will lose out even more. Will the Prime Minister explain why she wants to give less funding to the most deprived parts of our country?

The Prime Minister: No, that is not what we are doing. What we are doing is ensuring that we have a fairer funding formula across local authorities. We are also ensuring that we are making more money available for local authorities to spend. Let us just see what we see from council after council up and down the country. If people want to ensure that they have good local services and pay less in council tax, that is what they see under Conservative councils. There is a clear message: if you want to pay less council tax and have good local services, vote Conservative.

Jeremy Corbyn: Unfortunately for the Prime Minister the truth is that when Labour controls local councils, households pay on average £350 less than those living in

Tory areas. The average council tax per dwelling in Labour council areas is £1,169 compared to £1,520 in Tory council areas. The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives has called the fairer funding formula decision “perverse”. Even before this new formula kicks in, councils are losing out now. A Conservative council leader said earlier this year:

“we are really, really short of money...I mean there is no money” for him to run his services. What does the Prime Minister say to local authorities struggling to make ends meet while her Government continue to underfund the vital services they deliver?

The Prime Minister: We have over the years asked local councils to take some difficult decisions in relation to living within our means. Why did we have to do that? We had to do that because we were left the biggest deficit in our peacetime history by the last Labour Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: A political choice to impose austerity on local government has hit the poorest and worst-off the hardest in every one of our communities across the country. Since 2010, 50p of every £1 has been stripped from local authorities by her Government. That is the reality of what life is like for those trying to deliver services.

The evidence is clear: the Tories have abandoned communities across the country. They have left towns and cities to fend for themselves after nine years of vindictive, damaging austerity: 1,000 fewer Sure Start centres—one of the greatest achievements of the last Government; 760 fewer youth centres; and a social care system in absolute crisis. Child poverty is up. Violent crime is up. Homelessness and rough sleeping are also up. This Government stand for tax cuts for the richest and swingeing cuts for the rest. Will the Prime Minister now admit that far from tackling the “burning injustices” that she talked about, her Government’s cruel and unfair policies have pushed councils to the brink and left those “just about managing” not being able to manage at all? That is her legacy.

The Prime Minister: I am proud to lead a Government who have seen more children in good schools, more doctors, more jobs, lower borrowing, lower unemployment and lower taxes—that is Conservatives delivering across the country for everyone. What would we see with a Labour Government under the right hon. Gentleman? We would see them destroying our defences and abandoning our allies, billions more in borrowing, fewer opportunities and higher taxes for everyone. That is a Labour future and we will never let it happen.

Q3. [910332] **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): Some argue for completely free markets and self-regulation by big business, but this can lead to harmful content and extreme views being promoted. The tech giants who act as publishers have shown that without regulation they will not act. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the publication of the “Online Harms” White Paper and support the levelling of the playing field between print and broadcast media and the tech giants?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised a very important point that matters to people up and down the country. The internet can be absolutely brilliant at connecting people and providing them with information,

and connecting people not just nationally but across the world, but for too long the companies have not done enough to protect users, especially children and young people, from harmful content. That is not good enough, and that is why we have listened to campaigners and parents. We are putting a legal duty of care on internet companies to keep people safe. I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Culture Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on the work that they have done on this issue. Online companies must start taking responsibility for their platforms and help restore public trust in their technology.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Today, as we know, is the anniversary of the Good Friday agreement—a peace accord that not only ended violence in Northern Ireland but brought stability for all of us living throughout the United Kingdom. Brexit threatens to undermine that—to drag us out of the most successful peace project in history: the European Union. What a tragedy. It is now one week since talks began between the Tory Government and the Labour party. I want to ask the Prime Minister: at any point during these talks, has a second referendum been offered on the Government side of the negotiating table—yes or no, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: My position on a second referendum and the Government’s position has not changed. The House has rejected a second referendum two times. When we come to a deal, we will have to ensure that legislation goes through this House. Of course, it may be that there are those in this House who wish to press that issue as that legislation goes through, but my position on this has not changed.

Ian Blackford: It was a very simple question: has a referendum been offered—yes or no? People cannot have faith in a backroom deal cooked up by two leaders who do not possess the ingredients to hold their parties together, never mind hold these islands together. Scotland will not be forced to accept what these two Brexit parties are preparing to serve up. There is no such thing as a good Brexit. There is no such thing as a good Tory-Labour Brexit deal. The Prime Minister must recognise the difference between what she believes is duty, but what the rest of us see as delusion. In her final days as Prime Minister, will she accept the EU offer of a long extension, accept that she has run out of road, and accept that the only choice now is to put this back to the people?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, I have made my position clear. I think it is a little difficult for many of us in the House to see the right hon. Gentleman, week after week, stand up and say that the UK should stay in the European Union, given that Scottish independence would have meant taking Scotland out of the European Union. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a lot of noise. Let us hear the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison).

Q4. [910333] **Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Surplus waste incinerator capacity is taking pressure off efforts to reuse, recycle and reduce waste.

Will the Government strengthen their bid to host the 2020 United Nations climate change conference by putting a moratorium on new incinerator, gasification and pyrolysis applications, including the one in Westbury, in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, and for highlighting the fact that we are bidding to host COP26. The issue of incineration is crucial, particularly in certain local areas. We want to maximise the amount of waste that is sent to recycling rather than to incineration and landfill. Waste plants continue to play an important role in reducing the amount of rubbish that is sent to landfill, and we welcome the efforts to drive it down further, but if wider policies do not deliver our waste ambitions in the future—including those higher recycling rates—we will consider introducing a tax on the incineration of waste, which would operate in conjunction with the landfill tax and would take into account the possible impact on local authorities.

Q2. [910331] **Mr Ronnie Campbell** (Blyth Valley) (Lab): Charlie Foster, one of my young constituents—aged seven—has cystic fibrosis. When he has an attack, he feels as if he is breathing through a straw. I have never tried the test, but I will when I get back to my constituency. Young people are suffering very badly because a drug called Orkambi has not been licensed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. It increases the lung capacity of these kids by 42%, and it stops them having to be sent straight to hospital when they have an attack. Will the Prime Minister try to get that drug across the line and give kids like Charlie Foster a better quality of life?

The Prime Minister: Let me say first that I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with Charlie and his family.

We recognise the significant concerns about access to this drug. On 11 March, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health held a meeting with the company Vertex, NHS England and NICE, and they discussed how best to reach a deal so that people with cystic fibrosis and their families could benefit as soon as possible. They met again later in March and they are continuing those discussions, but I will ensure that the case that the hon. Gentleman has raised and the importance of the issue, are once again brought to the attention of the Department of Health.

Q5. [910334] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has produced an excellent report on leasehold reform. As a result of the doubling of ground rents, outrageous charges for permissions for minor improvements and the absolute scandal of developers' selling freeholds without even contacting leaseholders, the market is broken. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we cannot rely on voluntary codes to put this right and that we need legislation to restore fairness to the housing market?

The Prime Minister: I thank the Select Committee for its report, and I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which he has championed housing issues. His Act is already having an effect on homelessness reduction.

We have committed ourselves to legislation to reduce ground rent on future leases to a peppercorn. As for current leaseholders, we have been working with the industry to ensure that existing leases with onerous ground rent terms are changed to a better deal. Leaseholders of flats have a right of first refusal when their freeholders are planning to sell the properties, and we are considering introducing a right of first refusal for house lessees as well. Last year, we made a commitment to consider a range of charges facing leaseholders and freeholders, including permission fees, and to consider in what circumstances they are justified and whether they should be capped or banned. I have asked Lord Best to chair a working group to look into the regulating and professionalising of property agents.

We are considering the Committee's report carefully, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right: if we believe that a market is not working properly, we should act to deal with that.

Q7. [910336] **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware of the Channel 4 "Dispatches" investigation aired last week into the extent of the involvement of both BAE and British military personnel in the tragic war in Yemen. In the programme, it was claimed that BAE carries out 95% of the preparations for Typhoon bombing raids, including the one that killed 40 schoolchildren in August 2018. Will the Government act now to review arms export licences to Saudi Arabia and British complicity in these bombings?

The Prime Minister: We have one of the toughest regimes in relation to the export of arms across the world. The hon. Lady references the situation in Yemen. We are very clear that that cannot go on. It is four years since the beginning of that devastating conflict, and there needs to be a political settlement. We are working with and backing work that is being done by the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths. The parties have made significant progress towards an agreement to implement phase 1 of the redeployment of forces from Hodeidah, and we are urging all parties to honour the agreements that were made in Stockholm. Our total bilateral commitment to Yemen since the start of the conflict now stands at £717 million. We are backing the UN peace process. The coalition is there, and as has been acknowledged by the United Nations, it is there at the request of the Government of Yemen. We have been backing the United Nations peace process and will continue to do so, and we will continue to provide humanitarian support to the people of Yemen.

Q6. [910335] **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Children in Shrewsbury receive, on average, £4,350 per annum for their education. Their counterparts in Hackney receive over 50% more, at £6,590. These huge regional differences in funding for our schools are leading to real problems in Shropshire in supporting children with special educational needs and with the fabric of our school buildings. When will this Conservative Government finally tackle the huge differences in regional funding for our schools?

The Prime Minister: We are obviously working to improve education for every child, regardless of what part of the country they live in or their background. As

I made clear earlier, we are putting more funding into our schools through to 2020. We have recently announced an extra £250 million over two years for the high needs budget, together with extra money for children with special educational needs. My hon. Friend references the funding formula and the distribution of funds. The new national funding formula is about distributing funds more fairly, and historically underfunded schools will be receiving the biggest increases, of up to 6% per pupil, this year through the schools formula. We will also be allocating additional funding to small, remote schools that play an essential part in rural communities. We have recognised the need to introduce a fairer funding formula, and that is what we are doing.

Q8. [910337] **Sir Mark Hendrick** (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): In 2010, when the Conservative party took office, child poverty had been falling continuously in Preston for 16 years. Today, according to Government figures, 38% of children in Preston—that is nearly 8,000 kids—are living in poverty. Food banks are being overrun, and what is accelerating that demand? It is the roll-out of universal credit from July 2018. When will the Prime Minister scrap universal credit?

The Prime Minister: The way to ensure that we develop a sustainable solution to poverty is to have a strong economy and a welfare system that helps people into work. That is what universal credit does—200,000 more people in work as a result of introducing universal credit. Work is the best route out of poverty. The evidence is that a child growing up in a home where all the adults work is around five times less likely to be in poverty than a child from a home where nobody works. We are making sure that we encourage people into the workplace. There are more jobs out there; more people in work; a record level of people in employment. Work is the best route out of poverty.

Q14. [910343] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): On Monday, a constituent contacted me to tell me that three men armed with a knife had tried to rob his 15-year-old son as he walked from a friend's home in a neighbouring borough. He expressed his frustration that police stations are closing and that he never seems to see police on the beat any longer. To keep our young people safe, is it not time that the Mayor of London reversed his decision to close Barnet police station and others in the London suburbs?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that decisions about the closure of police stations across London are a matter for the Mayor of London. We have been protecting police funding. This year, there will be almost £1 billion extra available for the police, and the Metropolitan police are receiving up to £2.7 billion in funding in 2019-20—an increase on last year. We will always ensure that the police have the powers and resources that they need, but it is important that people recognise the responsibilities of the police and crime commissioners and the decisions they take. In London, that is the Labour Mayor of London.

Q9. [910338] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Speaker, I really think it would be unwise of me to mention any hotels in the highlands this week. At Dounreay in Caithness in my constituency,

we have a skills pool that is second to none. As Dounreay continues to decommission, it is vital that we redeploy those skills to the maximum benefit of the local economy and the UK economy. Can the Prime Minister give me an undertaking that the Government will work very closely with the management at Dounreay, the relevant local trade unions and the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority to make sure that redeployment of skills actually happens to the benefit of the UK?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that this must be a time of concern for staff at Dounreay. It is important that we recognise the skills that have been developed there and make sure we take every opportunity to put them to the benefit not just of local people but, as the hon. Gentleman says, of the United Kingdom. We welcome Dounreay Site Restoration's statement of support for its staff and its intention to support them through a transition into other employment. I understand that it will develop training and support programmes to put individuals in the strongest possible position to move into another local job in one of the growing local industries, such as space, which the hon. Gentleman has referenced in previous Prime Minister's questions, or renewable energy.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Government's commitment. We remain absolutely committed to supporting the region and the staff affected. We will continue to work with the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd, Cavendish Nuclear, Jacobs and AECOM during this time.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): The "Access for All" programme championed by this Conservative Government is helping more disabled people, elderly people and people with prams and pushchairs to access our stations with greater ease. After my campaign in Southport, Hillside station was the successful recipient of some of that funding. Will my right hon. Friend do more in that area so more of our stations right across the country truly give access for all?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his successful campaign to get that access at Hillside station. We need to continue the programme of opening up routes for disabled people by ensuring they have access to stations. We are moving closer to a transport sector that is truly accessible. The changes that will take place at Hillside are an example of that. If the programme continues to be delivered successfully, the Department for Transport will make submissions for further funding in due course. It is absolutely clear that we are providing extra opportunities for disabled people. I am pleased to say that 900,000 more disabled people are now in the workplace. Access is important for them. The campaigns that my hon. Friend and other right hon. and hon. Friends have run to get access to their stations are an important part of that.

Mr Speaker: In wishing the hon. Gentleman a happy birthday, I call Luke Pollard.

Q10. [910339] **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. As you may know, there are 53 Mondays this year on which rent is due for people who pay their rent weekly, but there are only 52 universal credit payments this

year. The Department for Work and Pensions has acknowledged that that is a problem it is awaiting Government action on. Will the Prime Minister confirm that she recognises that problem and that she will act to ensure that people do not need to find an extra week's rent or go into debt because of that entirely predictable universal credit fault?

The Prime Minister: Of course no year contains 53 weeks, so if somebody pays a 53rd rent payment in a year, it will cover some days in the subsequent year and mean that the following month has only four payment dates. As such, the claimant will be overpaid for their housing, and a shortfall is immediately recovered. It is about the way in which the days fall and making sure the system works for everybody.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): If the Prime Minister is seeking a year-long extension to Brexit, does she not recognise that that would cost the British taxpayer over £1 billion a month in subscriptions to the EU? Does she not agree that that funding would be better spent on tackling crime, or funding schools and even tax cuts for my constituents and others up and down the country?

The Prime Minister: I am pressing the case for the extension that I wrote to Donald Tusk about last week, which was in fact endorsed by Parliament last night. We could actually have been outside the European Union by now, if we had managed to get the deal through. I am continuing to work to ensure that we can deliver Brexit in a way that works for people across the country.

Q11. [910340] **Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab):** What would the Prime Minister boast is her Government's greatest achievement: the Brexit shambles, rising knife crime, record numbers using food banks, pay packets worth less than a decade ago, or the smallest Army since Waterloo?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the hon. Gentleman what I am proud of the Government achieving. We see more people in work than ever before. We have seen tax cuts for 32 million people. We are seeing wages rising, the deficit falling and debt coming down. We are restoring this country's finances to build a brighter future for all our constituents.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I would like to see more women on the boards of big business, so will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Ruth Cairnie, who has recently been appointed the chair of Babcock International, the first female chair it has ever had. Hopefully, she will improve the company's fortunes.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. I am very happy to congratulate Ruth Cairnie on achieving that role as chairman of Babcock. The Government have been working and have done a lot since 2010 to see more women on the boards of companies, as that is very important. The greater the diversity we have on those boards, the better those companies will do.

Q12. [910341] **Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab):** Before the Prime Minister's visit to Brussels, I have a little light reading for her. It is a graph of police funding from the

Government, in Gwent. It shows clearly that police funding is going down, not up. Will she study this carefully, and come back to the House with an accurate statement about what is really happening to police funding in this country?

The Prime Minister: We have been protecting police funding since 2015. This financial year, nearly £1 billion extra is available to police, and we have indeed put extra money into police. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced the £100 million extra that is going into key areas in relation to dealing with knife crime, and we have been protecting police funding since 2015.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Prime Minister earlier made reference to the British Indian diaspora. Does she agree that the diaspora should be commended for the fact that, despite comprising 4% of the UK population, they contribute some 10% of taxes to the Treasury?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to welcome the contribution that the Indian diaspora make to our country. My hon. Friend has referenced the economic contribution they make through their taxes, but many of them run successful businesses that employ people up and down the country, many of them are successfully exporting from this country and supporting our economy, and they also play an important role in our society. I am very happy to welcome that and to congratulate them on it.

Q13. [910342] **Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green):** This Friday, young people across the UK will again be calling for more urgent action on the climate emergency. So far every party leader except the Prime Minister has agreed to meet members of this extraordinary uprising. Following a speech at Davos and a meeting with Pope Francis, 16-year-old Greta Thunberg from Sweden, who sparked this global uprising, will visit Parliament on 23 April. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet Greta and hear direct from young people when she is here?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady asks whether I will meet and hear direct from young people about the issues they are concerned about in relation to the environment and climate change. I do that, and this gives me an opportunity to congratulate a school in my own constituency, St Mary's Catholic Primary School, which has won five green flag awards in the past 10 years and last year won the first ever national green heart hero award. I assure her that I often hear young people tell of the importance of climate change. This Government have a fine record on climate change. One day, the hon. Lady will actually stand up in this House and welcome the efforts that this Government have made.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is still this Government's firm commitment to leave the common fisheries policy and to negotiate as an independent coastal state no later than December 2020?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend; he has been consistent in his campaigning on this issue, which I know is of great importance to his constituents. We remain committed to establishing fairer fishing policies

that truly work for coastal communities. The deal that we have agreed with the European Union would see the UK leave the common fisheries policy, providing the UK with full control of its waters as an independent coastal state. We remain committed to coming out of the common fisheries policy.

Q15. [910344] **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Department for Work and Pensions has stated in ministerial responses to written questions that

“Universal Credit should not leave councils out of pocket”,

yet despite Highland Council providing evidence to show costs of £2.5 million, including £640,000 in additional administration, it still has no offer from the Prime Minister’s Government. They are doing a runner, and every household in the highlands is bearing the costs of universal credit. Is it not time that her Government paid their bill?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers I gave earlier in relation to universal credit and the importance of this system, which is encouraging people into work—200,000 more people are in work under universal credit and 700,000 people are getting money that they were entitled to but not receiving before. Universal credit is helping people into work and making sure that work pays.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): My constituents Mark and Panna Wilson have a little son, Aadi, who has the terrible condition of spinal muscular atrophy. He desperately needs the life-changing drug Spinraza, which is available in many other countries. I know that the Health Secretary is working on this urgently. Will

the Prime Minister intervene to create a new route to market for this important drug, so that my constituents can get the life-saving treatment that their son needs?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. Obviously, as he will appreciate, it is important that we ensure, first, that patients get access to cost-effective innovative medicines, but at a price that is fair and makes best use of NHS resources. That is the independent system that we have through the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which reviews the evidence. I understand that Biogen has submitted a revised submission to NICE in relation to Spinraza and that a meeting of NICE’s independent appraisal committee took place early in March to consider its recommendations. It is clear that everyone at the Department of Health and Social Care and in NICE recognises the significance of this drug, but we need to ensure that the decision taken is made on the basis of the clinical aspects, together with cost-effectiveness. That is what NICE will do in looking at the new offer.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): When Melrose Industries took over GKN last year, it promised Ministers that it would back British manufacturing and not reduce the company’s defence capacity without the Government’s permission. Last week, GKN announced that it intended to close the Kings Norton plant, which makes windscreens for military and civilian aircraft. Will the Prime Minister tell GKN that the Government expect the company to abide by both the spirit and the letter of the undertakings given by Melrose last year?

The Prime Minister: I was not aware of the particular issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. If I may, I will look into it and respond to him in writing.

Hong Kong: Pro-Democracy Activists

12.44 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the conviction of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong.

Mr Speaker: I call Minister Mark Field. We are very accustomed to seeing the right hon. Gentleman at the Dispatch Box recently. He is well and truly earning his keep.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I seem to be here to discuss either this area, the middle east or, indeed, Turkey, a debate to which I was responding in Westminster Hall earlier today.

I emphasise at the outset both to the right hon. Gentleman and to the House that the UK Government are acutely aware of our enduring responsibilities to Hong Kong. We were a joint signatory to upholding the joint declaration between the UK and China some 35 years ago, and the joint declaration is of course lodged with the United Nations. As such, we remain absolutely committed to monitoring and ensuring the faithful implementation of the joint declaration and the principle of one country, two systems. I reassure the House that we clearly and consistently raise our concerns with the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities. Parliament is updated on developments in Hong Kong through our six-monthly reports submitted by the Foreign Secretary, the most recent of which was published on 27 March. We always stand ready to comment publicly and robustly when appropriate.

Yesterday, the Hong Kong courts gave their verdict on the nine key figures in the Hong Kong Occupy movement. The protesters were arrested after large-scale protests in 2014. Each was found guilty of at least one public nuisance offence, and such offences carry a maximum sentence of seven years in prison. We shall have a better understanding of the severity of the sentence, and therefore the signal that the decision purports to send to others who choose to exercise their rights under Hong Kong's Basic Law and Bill of Rights, once sentences have been handed down. Sentencing is due on 24 April, and the defendants have the right to appeal. It would therefore not be appropriate to comment further or in detail on the ongoing legal cases, but suffice it to say that this is a potentially protracted legal process that may take years rather than months.

I have visited Hong Kong twice as a Foreign Office Minister and have held meetings with a number of senior legal figures. On my most recent visit in November, I raised the issue of the rule of law directly with the deputy chief justice, as well as with representatives from the legal, political and business communities. All staunchly defended the independence of the judiciary and it remains our position that Hong Kong's rule of law remains robust, largely thanks to its world-class independent judiciary. Many Members will know that Baroness Hale, Lord Hoffmann and others are part and parcel of the panel that is based in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong citizens are guaranteed the right to freedom of assembly and demonstration under the Sino-British joint declaration of 1984 and the Basic Law, and it is

essential that those rights are properly respected in a democracy. Hong Kong's success and stability depend on its high degree of enduring autonomy and its respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the joint declaration and the Basic Law. The Foreign Secretary recently pronounced that he was

"concerned that on civil and political freedoms, Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy is being reduced."

It would be deeply concerning if the ruling discourages legitimate protest in future or discourages Hong Kong citizens from engaging in political activity.

Mr Carmichael: I thank the Minister for that answer. I hope that he will be as robust in his tone when speaking to the Chinese Government as he has been in his remarks to the House today.

The prosecution and now conviction of nine leaders of the Umbrella movement is the latest in a series of egregious human rights abuses by the Government in China. Using the criminal justice system and public order offences in this way is an abuse of fundamental and internationally protected human rights. Amnesty International points out that the convictions all stem solely from non-violent direct actions in largely peaceful protests. As the Minister's noble friend Lord Patten said, it is

"appalling divisive to use anachronistic common law charges in a vengeful pursuit of political events which took place in 2014".

Will the Minister make the strongest possible representations to the Chinese Government that these convictions are an abuse not just of the activists' human rights but of China's treaty obligations? This country has both a moral and a legal responsibility to pursue this matter with all vigour. We made commitments to the people of Hong Kong at the time of the handover to China and we still have those commitments under the Sino-British joint declaration.

The one country, two systems framework promised the people of Hong Kong progress towards democracy, but these convictions are not an isolated incident. Over the past five years, we have seen the abduction of Hong Kong booksellers who published titles critical of China's rulers; a political party banned; a senior *Financial Times* journalist, Victor Mallet, expelled from the city; and, now, proposals to change Hong Kong's extradition laws to enable suspected criminals to be extradited from Hong Kong to mainland China, which is something that not only political activists but businesspeople fear, as they believe they could be in danger if the change goes ahead.

Will the Government stand by the people of Hong Kong and their human rights, and will the Minister ensure that we in this country do not allow the Chinese Government to break the promises that this country made to the people of Hong Kong?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his considered comments, and I fully accept and agree with the concerns he has raised. We take very seriously our responsibilities under one country, two systems, and we have expressed concerns in consecutive six-monthly reports that there has been a tightening of individual rights. We also feel that commerce and the independence of the judicial system have remained true to one country, two systems.

[Mark Field]

It is in China's interest that Hong Kong continues to succeed under the framework. The joint declaration must remain as valid today as it was when it was signed three and a half decades ago. It is a legally binding treaty that is registered with the United Nations. I have raised this, and will continue to raise it, with my Chinese counterparts. Some criticism has been addressed to the FCO in relation to the idea of having a six-monthly report, which we feel is a particularly important foundation for ongoing confidence within Hong Kong that we take very seriously the responsibilities to which we have signed up.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the change to the extradition laws. We are aware that the Hong Kong Government have proposed changes to legislation. We are seriously considering the potential implications of those changes, including how the proposals might affect UK citizens and, indeed, our current extradition arrangements with Hong Kong.

The British consul general to Hong Kong, the very talented Andy Heyn, has spoken to senior figures in Hong Kong's Administration to seek clarity on what the proposals will mean for UK citizens, for our law enforcement co-operation and for the current extradition arraignments. He has raised the potential impact of the proposals on business confidence in Hong Kong and has explained our concern that, given the sensitivity of the issues raised by these extradition proposals, considerably more time should be given for a full and wide consultation with interested parties before the Hong Kong authorities seek to put it into law.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): In his excellent statement, my right hon. Friend emphasised the importance of the independence of the judiciary in Hong Kong, with judges of the calibre of Baroness Hale and Lord Hoffmann. If the Chinese Government really wish it to be believed that they are upholding the highest standards of human rights, is it not essential that the court is allowed to do its duty with full independence?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend, who has worked hard on these matters, which he takes seriously. Indeed, he headed a delegation when I first went to mainland China some 15 years ago, and I am well aware that he keeps an eagle eye on what is happening, particularly in Hong Kong.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When I was most recently in Hong Kong, I had a chance to speak to senior legal figures, and they do feel that the judicial system and its independence are being upheld but, clearly, the sense in which other rights are being questioned and eroded by the Chinese authorities raises some concerns in that regard. Hitherto, we have been confident that cases coming before the Hong Kong judiciary have been dealt with in a fair way and without political interference.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing it, and I share his profound concern at yesterday's verdict.

A serious discussion in this House on the situation in Hong Kong is overdue. China's erosion of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Hong Kong Basic Law has been growing since the pro-democracy Umbrella protests in 2014. The last few years have seen an increasing crackdown on dissent and protest, with political parties banned, pro-democracy candidates blocked and journalists expelled. The conviction of nine leaders of the Hong Kong Umbrella movement yesterday—they could face seven years in prison for organising peaceful protests—is totally disproportionate and clearly politically motivated. The proposals to change Hong Kong's extradition law mean they could serve sentences thousands of miles away in mainland China.

The Sino-British joint declaration is a legally binding treaty registered with the United Nations, and the British Government are a joint guarantor, with China, of the rights of Hong Kong citizens. I have one simple question for the Minister: how will the Government fulfil their legal responsibilities to the citizens of Hong Kong?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution, and I am sorry to hear that her constituency office was attacked over the weekend, which is unacceptable in the world in which we live. It is a salutary reminder that some of the concerns we deal with across the world are becoming quite prevalent closer to home.

We take one country, two systems very seriously, and we will continue to do so. The fact that we are the guarantor is important. As I have said, the six-monthly reports come not without criticism from our Chinese counterparts, but they provide a detailed opportunity. I encourage Members who have an interest in Hong Kong, and perhaps even those who do not have a strong interest, to read the reports when they come out every six months. The reports address specific concerns and cases, including a number of those raised by the hon. Lady.

Our continuing work from London, Hong Kong and, indeed, Beijing is important as we try to maintain the one country, two systems approach. Our view is that the approach is very much in China's interests, and China has implicitly recognised the importance of Hong Kong as a financial capital market and business centre. It is therefore equally important that we impress upon China that the uniqueness of Hong Kong will be properly maintained, with Hong Kong reaching its full potential, only if we ensure that "two systems," as set out in the joint declaration, is every bit as important as "one country."

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: A noted Sinologist, linguist and cerebral denizen of the House, Mr Richard Graham.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The six-monthly Foreign Office report on Hong Kong, which is circulated by the all-party China group that I have the honour to chair, recognises the close bilateral Hong Kong-UK relations on culture and trade in many sectors, but the Minister is right to highlight the continuing pressures on Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy. Will he confirm that, in relation to the pro-democracy activists found guilty of public nuisance, the appeal process is still very much open and that the

higher courts including, if needed, the Court of Final Appeal must take into consideration the freedoms of assembly and speech guaranteed under the joint declaration?

Mark Field: I am happy to confirm that. As I said, we have highlighted our hope that a range of recent court rulings do not discourage lawful protest in the future. I stress that Hong Kong citizens are guaranteed the rights to freedom of assembly and demonstration under the joint declaration and the Basic Law.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): May I express my solidarity with the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and in particular her constituency staff?

I also thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for raising this important matter. We share his concerns about democracy and human rights. As the Minister said, the UK has a particular responsibility for Hong Kong in our ongoing commitment to democracy and the rule of law. Amnesty International has said that this case is

“a crushing blow for freedom of expression and peaceful protest in Hong Kong.”

Does the Minister agree that judicial independence is absolutely critical to commercial investment and certainty and that it is in the interests of China as well? What Hong Kong-related discussions have he and his colleagues had with regard to trade talks, and what reassurances have Ministers sought over China’s commitment to Hong Kong’s autonomy and the independence of the legal system?

Mark Field: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman and thank him for his comments. We are often criticised for speaking endlessly about trade and other opportunities. Clearly, Hong Kong was very much a mercantile base for the UK from the 1840s onwards. However, we do not in any way take lightly the importance of addressing human rights issues, particularly for those living in Hong Kong.

We have made it very clear that for Hong Kong to fulfil its potential—and, indeed, for China to do so in areas such as the belt and road initiative—the independence of, dare I say it, a common law system such as the British legal system is seen as more reliable for investors than perhaps the more doubtful, or at least less orthodox, systems in Shanghai and elsewhere. Although Pudong in Shanghai is a very important financial centre for China and does a lot of domestic work, Hong Kong still enjoys the confidence of many international capital markets.

On the specifics of free trade agreements in a post-Brexit world, clearly Hong Kong would be towards the top of the list, given the strength of our relationship. We have made it very clear to China that one of the reasons we want one country, two systems to be properly promoted is that it is very much in the interests of China’s plans for its own economic development in the years to come. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his focus on that particular issue, but we should not deny that human rights issues will remain extremely important as far as our own commitment to one country, two systems is concerned.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Yesterday’s convictions are extremely concerning, involving as they do a 75-year-old pastor, Rev. Chu, who declared himself as a peaceful

protester, and Benny Tai, whom I invited to a fringe event at last year’s Conservative party conference and who spoke of the erosion of academic freedoms in Hong Kong.

Does the Minister agree that Hong Kong’s proposed new extradition laws, which may result in political activists and even international business people being in danger of extradition to mainland China, would fundamentally undermine Hong Kong’s autonomy, do irreparable damage to one country, two systems, and destroy business confidence in Hong Kong as a result? Is it not in all our interests, especially business, to defend Hong Kong’s freedom, autonomy and rule of law, which underpin its status as an open, international financial centre?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend, who speaks so knowledgeably about these issues, particularly in relation to Hong Kong but also China as a whole. I reassure her that it remains the UK Government’s view that for Hong Kong’s future success it is absolutely essential that it enjoys, and is seen to enjoy, the full measure of the high degree of autonomy and the rule of law, as set out in the joint declaration and enshrined in the Basic Law, and in keeping with the commitment to one country, two systems.

In my earlier response to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), I referred to issues regarding the planned extradition law, which is a good example of how difficult cases make for tough law. As my hon. Friend may be aware, it has come about because of an important case where an individual was murdered in Taiwan and the accused has ended up in Hong Kong but there is no extradition treaty in place. For that reason, given that Taiwan is regarded as part of One China, the issue suddenly has far greater implications.

I believe, as I am sure my hon. Friend does, that it is important that any changes to extradition arrangements from Hong Kong to mainland China must respect Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy and cannot and must not affect the rights and freedoms set out in the joint declaration.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for what he has said so far, but may I press him further on the Sino-British joint declaration? How confident is he that China is respecting it as legally binding? If he feels that it is not doing so—which is my observation—what steps is the Department taking to represent the UK Government’s view that it should be legally binding on the Chinese Government?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I will see her later this afternoon for a Westminster Hall debate on other matters—it is one of those busy days. Obviously, we are concerned by some of the Chinese Government’s comments about the joint declaration. Our view is that it is and must remain as valid today as it was when it was signed more than 35 years ago. It is a legally binding treaty, as has been pointed out, registered at the United Nations, and it continues therefore to be in force. We are committed to monitoring closely its implementation and we will continue to do so.

Of course we are concerned. We only need to look at the last half a dozen or so six-monthly reports to recognise that we think there is a deterioration in the way in which China is looking at this particular issue,

[Mark Field]

but we will stand up for the rights of all Hong Kong people. As I have said, this is also in the interests of China, and it is an important part of the process to make that very clear to ensure that one country, two systems prevails.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): About 100 years after the first Chinese legation was established in London in 1877, I was at a gathering with the then Chinese chargé where he made an elegant joke in Greenwich about how east meets west. I think the same could be true about Hong Kong.

Will my right hon. Friend make it clear that if the sentence is more than nominal, and if there is no chance to appeal against the convictions, people will think that the declarations and matters of principle agreed with the Chinese are not being properly fulfilled, which will affect both the future prosperity of Hong Kong and how people see China?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I am not sure what I was doing 42 years ago, but I know that he was already a Member of this House at that time. He makes a valid and fair point. He is absolutely correct that it is vital that we maintain that for the interests of all Hong Kong citizens today and in the future. We will continue to make the robust case, which is absolutely essential.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): You will recall, Mr Speaker, that in 2014, at the height of the Umbrella movement protests, the Chinese embassy prevented a delegation from this country's Select Committee on Foreign Affairs from going to Hong Kong. It is clear that the Chinese Communist authorities are extremely sensitive about any scrutiny and any questions asked by this House and its Committees. When the Minister meets his Chinese Government counterparts, will he emphasise to them that this country has a pluralistic parliamentary democracy, which is what the people of Hong Kong also wish to have?

Mr Speaker: I rather remember that the Chinese Government's obstruction at that time was regarded across the House as thoroughly reprehensible. I also recall that the Chinese embassy had the greatest possible difficulty in grasping the concept of an independent Parliament. I think some re-education was required.

Mark Field: I think some of us get rather concerned by an independent Parliament, particularly members of the Executive at any one time, but that is another matter. I remember being on the Back Benches for many years, so I do not in any way criticise you, Mr Speaker.

I very much agree with the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes). We need to do our level best to ensure that we stand up for our rights. I do not think that the Chinese are entirely unknowing of that. Of course, they know exactly what is going on and want to squeeze those rights. It is interesting, however, that in a significant number of areas they recognise the benefit of two systems, including commercially, where the idea

of a settled rule of law will allow capital to go into Hong Kong. We need to do our level best to ensure that all aspects are maintained, and we shall do so.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Following on from what you said, Mr Speaker, I was heartened by the Minister's earlier comments about the correlation between future free trade negotiations and our continuing pressure regarding human rights. Will the Minister confirm that, when we talk about the rule of law with Chinese interlocutors, we mean our international definition of the rule of law rather than theirs?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is obviously trying to get herself on to the next trip that I take to Hong Kong. We need that matter explained in a much more succinct style than I am used to doing. None the less, she is absolutely right: we do recognise that at a time when—dare I say it?—the rules-based international order is coming under increasing threat, indeed from some unexpected quarters as well, we need to work together with many of our counterparts to ensure that we make that argument as robustly as we can.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): In his opening remarks, the Minister made it clear that the Hong Kong judicial system had integrity and was robust, and he evidenced that through the talks that he had when he visited the area with senior legal figures. In the same breath, though, he is saying that the system is being undermined. Will he tell me how the system is being undermined and what evidence he has for that?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman and I were on a trip to Hong Kong more years ago than I care to imagine—I think it was about 13 years ago. Obviously, it was the first time that I had been to the area as a parliamentarian. Our concerns are over the right to protest and press rights. Members have already referred to the issue of the very sudden withdrawal of the visa of Victor Mallet, the *Financial Times* journalist. There are a number of issues in the area that we would call civil rights, but, as far as the legal system is concerned, there is a sense that that remains independent. Equally, though, we are concerned. In relation to the judgments that took place yesterday, there is likely to be a long and winding road of appeals that will take place over some considerable time. It is one reason why we are not commenting directly on this, because, obviously, we want to read the full judgments, but we recognise that there will be appeals from virtually all the defendants.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Peaceful protest and the right of free expression are fundamental parts of democracy. Recently, China has put pressure not only on Hong Kong, but on Taiwan. Will my right hon. Friend impress on the Chinese Government that it is totally and utterly unacceptable to try to distort the position in Hong Kong and that, as Hong Kong acts almost as an investment gateway for China, it is important that they understand that we will stand up for the people whom we seek to protect?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I very much agree with what he has to say. It is important to make a distinction between Taiwan and Hong Kong. Much as we are concerned about increasing

pressure being put on Taiwan, the Hong Kong situation is different, as it is set out in a joint declaration. Indeed, the whole idea of one country, two systems that came into place in July 1997 absolutely protects the position of Hong Kong. There is a slight danger—dare I say it?—in trying to equate the situation in Taiwan with that in Hong Kong. It may well be in the Chinese Government's interest so to do as we then potentially undermine the Hong Kong situation. Hong Kong's rights are set out and it is the UK Government's responsibility, as we have all pointed out, to make sure that they are maintained.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that, along with our counterparts, he and we will do what we can to defend human rights, but does he accept that our ability and strength in defending our fundamental values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which we share across Europe, will be less in the event of Brexit? People who voted in 2016 did not anticipate the muscular, aggressive, authoritarian approach of China, which means that we are now seeing extraditions, the arrests of people engaged in peaceful protest, Canadian nationals facing the death sentence, and Britain in a much more vulnerable position, as it will have to rely on trade with China and therefore turn a blind eye to human rights. Does he not think that, in light of this emerging evidence of abuse, the people should have the right now to a public vote on the deal?

Mark Field: Just when we thought that we had got away from the Brexit debate, here we are. The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point in this regard: we must not take our eye off the ball when it comes to standing up for human rights as we come to make trade agreements. I am actually much more optimistic and hopeful than he is, and I say that from the perspective of a Foreign Office Minister. As we leave the European Union, we will have to work hard—and we are working hard—and redouble our efforts to make sure that the strongest relationship in a range of multilateral organisations is maintained—whether in the United Nations in New York and Geneva, or in organisations such as the World Bank, the IMF and the OECD. I am very confident that we will rise to that challenge. It is certainly important that we keep the connection open as much as we can. For example, in the UN, we are working extremely closely—and will continue to do so for some considerable time—with France, which is a permanent member of the Security Council, and with Germany and Poland, which are important partners in the European Union and also now on the Security Council this year.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): It is deeply concerning that the Hong Kong Government recently rejected the renewal of the visa of the *Financial Times* journalist. Does my right hon. Friend agree that upholding freedom of speech and of the press is essential for Hong Kong's way of life?

Mark Field: Absolutely. We were particularly concerned by the Hong Kong authorities' unprecedented rejection of a visa extension—it was actually a small visa extension for the senior British journalist Victor Mallet who is now the Paris correspondent. It was simply a matter of the last two or three months of his time in Hong Kong

that was at stake. In the absence of an explanation from the authorities, we can only conclude, as my hon. Friend rightly points out, that this move was politically motivated. I believe that it undermines the basic idea of freedom of speech and freedom of the press in Hong Kong, which, as I have said, are guaranteed by that joint declaration.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The creation of Hong Kong was a fantastic example of British-Sino co-operation in building a global city that is a massive player in the global economy. Indeed, the Sino-British joint declaration itself was a great achievement of co-operation and it was done with great sacrifice from the British side, as Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, had been part of the British territories in perpetuity. It was done for practical and diplomatic reasons. Can the Minister reassert the continuing mandate that Britain has to ensure that the Sino-British declaration is respected until July 2047? What practical steps will he take to achieve that?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. In many ways, the joint declaration and the Sino-UK discussions were a fantastic template for broader co-operation and it is to our regret that that is now under pressure, and we will continue to stand up for it. I will, if I may, make this point. Obviously, there has been speculation in relation to what might happen in the broader region around Shenzhen and Guangzhou, which may be linked together as a particular region along with Hong Kong. Again, we will keep our eye on exactly what changes are being made in that regard, although one can see the importance of the interconnections economically within the broader region. I shall certainly be noting what happens in the greater bay area, which is an area that I am looking to visit later this year. I will be going to Guangzhou and Shenzhen and then to Hong Kong at the same time. Obviously, we will report back to the House after that time.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): As someone who grew up in Hong Kong, I am concerned about the progression of extradition that may occur to these people who are currently seeking some kind of appeal. What can the Foreign Office do to stop any extradition from Hong Kong to China?

Mark Field: As I mentioned earlier, this is a live debate at the moment because of a particular case, which is very much at a preliminary stage. The lobbying that our own consul general has received from business connections makes it very clear that there is a reduction in broader confidence. On the rights of British national overseas passport holders, my hon. Friend will be aware that the right of abode in the UK is defined under the Immigration Act 1971 and only British citizens and certain British subjects have that right. However, we have ongoing responsibilities to Hong Kong citizens, and even to those who do not enjoy that right of abode, and we will continue to make the strongest of cases to ensure that, up to 2047 and potentially beyond, such rights are properly upheld.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses. China is guilty of some of the worst human rights abuses and religious persecution in the world. Minister, in discussions with the Chinese and

[Jim Shannon]

Hong Kong Governments regarding the recent guilty verdict, what was done to secure the trio's release, and what will be done to secure the release of the other six who face impending imprisonment? Their only crime was to promote democracy as part of the 50 years of autonomy and freedom that were promised by the Chinese Government when Hong Kong was handed over in 1997. China often says no, but acts in a different way.

Mark Field: We very much hope and understand that, given the nature of the alleged offences and the protracted legal process, any individuals will not be held in custody but have a right to a reasonable bail within short order. As the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, three people have already been released, and I very much hope the other six will be. We will be keeping an eagle eye on this matter. Above all, we trust that the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region will continue to make every effort to ensure that the environment in which the media and individuals operate is conducive to freedom, including freedom from self-censorship or the like. Our officials in Hong Kong, London and Beijing—we have a number of consulates general in China that are nearer to Hong Kong—will continue to monitor these issues very closely.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I echo the concerns expressed on both sides of the House that, in the light of recent developments, the rights of citizens of Hong Kong are being eroded. What is the Government's view of the steps that the Chinese authorities should now take to allay such concerns and to restore faith that these fundamental freedoms—and, indeed, democracy—in Hong Kong are not under threat?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his thoughtful contribution. I am working on this issue in many ways with our Hong Kong desk at the Foreign Office and with our consul general. It is rather important that we try to work through a pathway, rather than just stepping back and taking a view that we do not like what is going on; let us try to work together constructively. As I alluded to earlier, the belt and road initiative is a good example of where working together to ensure that Hong Kong's freedoms are maintained will actually be in China's own interests—not just in trading terms. If I were Chinese, I might also think that there is an important opportunity to utilise Hong Kong as a chance for experimental changes in freedoms that may or may not be in the mind of this regime or future Chinese regimes. There is a lot of work in progress, and I am working closely with my counterparts on the issue.

Voter ID Pilots

1.21 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the Government's voter ID trials ahead of local government elections.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I should say at the outset that I am afraid my voice might give out, but I hope that everybody will bear with me.

Electoral fraud is an unacceptable crime that strikes at a core principle of our democracy—that is, that everybody's vote matters. There is undeniable potential for electoral fraud in our current system, and the perception of this undermines public confidence in our democracy. We need only to walk up to the polling station and say our name and address, which is an identity check from the 19th century, based on the assumption that everyone in the community knows each other and can dispute somebody's identity. Dare I say it?—if we really wanted to go back to 19th-century politics, neither I nor the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) would even be in this House. The voter ID pilots, which are supported by the independent Electoral Commission, are a reasonable way to ensure that voter ID works for everybody ahead of a national roll-out.

Showing ID is something that people of all backgrounds already do every day—when we take out a library book, claim benefits or pick up a parcel from the post office. Proving who we are before we make a decision of huge importance at the ballot box should be no different. I can reassure the House that both last year's pilots and the decades of experience in Northern Ireland show that voter ID does not have an adverse effect on election turnout or participation. Furthermore, the Government have consulted a range of civil society groups to ensure that voter ID will work for everybody. Crucially, local authorities will provide alternative methods of ID free of charge to electors who do not have a specified form of ID, ensuring that everybody who is registered has the opportunity to vote.

At next month's local elections, voters in 10 diverse areas across the country will be asked to show ID before they place their vote. Let us remember that those votes will have a real effect on communities, so these elections are important. People should be confident in our democracy. If they are, they are more likely to participate in it. My message to the voters in the pilot areas is that these pilots are about protecting their vote. We want them to go out and use that vote, and to take part in these elections. I ask hon. Members here today to ask their constituents to do so. Voter ID is part of how this Government are strengthening the integrity of our electoral system to give the public confidence that our elections are secure and fit for the 21st century.

Cat Smith: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

Next month, voters in 10 local authorities across England will be using the voter ID pilots in local elections. These schemes have been the focus of significant controversy. At last year's local elections, where there

were five pilot areas, the Minister appeared to celebrate the fact that at least 350 citizens were excluded from voting for not having valid ID. This included people who had voted legitimately for their entire lives.

The Government claim that voter ID is designed to tackle electoral fraud in polling stations. However, during an evidence session with the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, the Minister could not even say whether the pilots had had any impact on voter fraud. Given that the Minister was unable to draw any conclusions from the last set of pilots, what does she expect to gain and how will she measure success this year?

Civil society groups and the Equality and Human Rights Commission have warned that voter ID will have a disproportionate impact on voters from ethnic minority communities, older people, trans people and disabled people. Has the Minister failed to notice the Windrush scandal, which demonstrated that it can be more difficult for some communities to provide official documentation than for others? We all know that voter ID will have significant ramifications for our democracy, because 3.5 million citizens—7.5% of the electorate—do not have access to photo ID. If voter identification requirements are restricted to passports or driving licences, as they are in some areas, that number rises to 11 million people, which is 24% of the electorate.

Following last year's pilots, it was revealed that rolling out voter ID nationwide would increase the cost of each general election by as much as £20 million. Is this an effective use of taxpayers' money when local authorities are already on their knees? If the Minister thinks that these pilots schemes are value for money, why has she refused to tell the House how much they will cost?

Electoral fraud is a serious crime, which is why we would support any effective measures to combat it. However, this Government are not focusing on the real issues. There is no evidence of widespread voter personation in the UK. The latest figures by the Electoral Commission show that, of the 266 cases of electoral fraud investigated by police last year, 140 related to campaign offences and just eight related to personation fraud at the polling station, which is what the Minister claims this trial is designed to tackle. Does she think her Government have the right priorities when, despite most electoral offences being committed by political candidates, it is actually the innocent voters who are being excluded from our politics because of this ill-thought-out policy?

With local elections fast approaching and the Government planning a roll-out at the next general election, it is only right that Members of this House have the opportunity to scrutinise and comment on the Government's plans. We are therefore requesting that the Government allow time for a parliamentary debate to discuss these pilot schemes ahead of local elections next month.

Chloe Smith: I am sorry to have to start in this tone, but almost everything the hon. Lady said has just been wrong. She suggested that we were unable to draw conclusions from last year's pilots. That is simply not the case. Both the Cabinet Office's evaluation and that of the independent Electoral Commission—which she may wish to dispute but it is, none the less, that of the independent Electoral Commission—concluded that the pilots did what they set out to do. The pilots were a

success, in that the overwhelming majority of people were able to cast their vote with no impediment. What is more—here is the really important point—the evidence showed that no particular demographic group was affected by the requirement to bring ID.

Cat Smith *indicated dissent.*

Chloe Smith: The hon. Lady is shaking her head, but she knows that it is true. Perhaps this is part of the pattern we have seen from the Labour party of saying one thing and doing another. She still cannot explain why many constituency Labour parties require voter ID for their own selection meetings. She cannot explain why these were acceptable powers when they were passed by the last Labour Government; and she cannot explain why the last Labour Government did this in Northern Ireland, and why the Minister at that time said that this measure would

“tackle electoral abuse effectively without disadvantaging honest voters”—[*Official Report*, 10 July 2001; Vol. 371, c. 740.]

The Opposition cannot explain any of these things, and that is just not good enough.

Let me turn to the detail of what the hon. Lady has tried to put forward. Among her scaremongering and, frankly, conspiracy theorising, she made reference to the costs of these measures. I would like to make it clear to the House that, through correspondence with the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, I have been clear about how those costs will be able to be accounted for. She asks whether we can allow time for a full debate on this in Parliament. I would beg advice from the Chair, perhaps, but I suggest that this is that debate. Moreover, the powers that the previous Labour Government put in place allow for this process to be done in this way, without any such debate, so if she has that problem, she ought to have taken it up with her colleagues of that time.

The hon. Lady asks what we are expecting to see this year. We are expecting to see that voters will be able to cast their ballots in a way that is protected. She does down voters by suggesting that this is in some way an attack on them and—I think this was her phrase—some kind of privileging of the political class. That is simply not the case. We are engaged in the breadth of the work that we need to do to keep our elections safe and secure and to update them for the 21st century. If she thinks that we should not be doing that, she is welcome to live back in the 19th century, but I do not think we should be doing so. We should be making sure that voters can cast their votes in a way that is protected and means that they can have confidence that they are not being usurped in their role.

The hon. Lady asks whether we should be focusing on crime that involves small numbers. Well, really—I ask her whether she would have said that decades ago about, for example, rape. Would she have said that about a crime that was under-reported? Would she have said that about a crime that involves small numbers simply for that reason? Of course she would not. Nobody would do so, because it would of course be disgraceful. It would be disgraceful to make that argument about small numbers, and that is the argument that Labour Members are making. Crimes with small numbers should not be ignored—people should none the less be protected against them, and that is what we are doing.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When I was first elected, I used to come and go from this Palace unchallenged. Now I am required to show ID even within its precincts—but is that a big deal?

Chloe Smith: I think my right hon. Friend makes the point, quite rightly, that we expect to show who we are in every walk of everyday life. It is quite fair enough that we do so at our workplace, and quite fair enough that we do so when we pick up a parcel from the post office, when we apply for benefits, or when we do many types of things that involve interacting with public services or just going about our everyday life. It is therefore right that we do that in our elections as well.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): There is one instance of voter fraud in this country for every 1.6 million votes cast. It is a problem that is so minor as really not to exist at all, yet it continues to be the focus of the Government's policy in this area. One can only conclude that it is a policy driven by suspicion based on prejudice rather than hard facts and evidence. We know that forcing people to produce ID to vote will put people off. So is it not time that the Government stopped concentrating on putting hurdles in front of people who do vote and tackled the real problem, which is the 14.5 million people who are registered to vote but do not do so? When are the Government going to prioritise measures to improve participation through public education, extending the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds and piloting new ways to allow people to vote, including electronically?

Chloe Smith: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman, also, is not talking on the basis of the evidence. He should be able to do so from the evaluation that we published last year, which clearly said that there was no such negative impact on people turning out and participating in voting. That is crucially important. I am very pleased to have been able to bolster that work from last year with work this year to speak to groups across civil society who may have concerns that people they represent would be less able than others to deal with this requirement. I am absolutely confident that the equalities aspects of this work have been thoroughly considered, both by us in central Government and by the local authorities that are piloting it. I am afraid that he is not speaking from the evidence when he says that we know this is not going to work. Had he read the academic literature, looked into the Northern Ireland example and looked at the evaluation, he would know that that is not the case.

We need to make sure that this work is part of encouraging people to go to vote. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right on that, of course; we should be doing it hand in hand with encouraging people to vote. That is why I am proud that we have only recently refreshed our democratic engagement plan, which is full of the ways that we will be continuing to do that work, as we have always done. We are working closely with the Electoral Commission, and all the local authorities that are relevant at these elections, to encourage people to vote. I would hope that hon. Members would join me in doing so in a way that prioritises the security of those votes alongside participation in them.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am glad that the range of councils taking part in voter ID pilots this time is broad—more than 10—in about three or four different ways.

May I suggest that in agreeing that we should do more to get voter registration up to much higher levels, we should have a debate when the Electoral Commission has done a study on the result of these voter ID pilots, and then we can really hear what the proper policy of the Labour party and the SNP is to be?

Chloe Smith: Those are words of wisdom. I would be happy to confirm to the House what I have said in other contexts, which is that it is the intention of this Government to move from having done pilots to being able to have a nationwide policy at the next general election. We think that is important, so that is our intention for 2022. We are looking forward to the information that comes from these pilots, on top of last year's work, to be able to inform that and to make sure that the scheme works for voters and any concerns can be addressed.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the Minister think that perhaps more people might be put off voting not because they might have to show ID but because they have realised that sometimes their vote is totally ignored by people in this House?

This system has worked perfectly well in Northern Ireland, and I have seen it for myself. I really do think that we are talking about common sense. If I have to go to the post office and show something to be able to pick up my parcel, I cannot see, particularly with the extra things that the Minister has put in to ensure that people can be identified, how anyone could think that this is anything other than common sense.

Chloe Smith: I thoroughly welcome those comments. The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. This is simply a matter of common sense. It is a quite reasonable and proportionate thing to ask people to do that is in line with what we do elsewhere in the UK and throughout everyday life.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker,

“How will we check people's ID? We will be using a two-level check to verify the person attending is who we have on our membership list. Named Photo ID: This is for branch officers to see photographic ID which has a name that matches the name on the list and is of the person who has presented to the meeting...Proof of Address”.

That is from the Tottenham constituency Labour party website with regard to its own meetings. If Labour Members think that two forms of proof are needed to vote in their own elections, why do they think that is not appropriate for national elections?

Chloe Smith: I quite agree, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has laid it out so clearly. It is not good enough to say one thing and do another, and then come to this House and lecture others on it.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister will not be surprised that I do not share her enthusiasm for this new system. Will she look to what the Welsh Government are doing to expand the franchise and the inclusivity of voting, including consulting on e-voting? Will she consider

that in future? If we are to make voting more accessible and expand the ways that people are able to vote, we need to learn from good practice. The Welsh Government are looking at e-voting pilots in local government elections in 2022, and the UK Government could learn from that for future general elections.

Chloe Smith: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's characteristically thoughtful way of addressing this matter and welcome his engagement with the substance of it. He raised a number of things. First, I am a supporter of the franchise having been devolved to Wales, and I look forward to seeing what my counterparts in Wales will be doing with that shortly. I work closely with them and, indeed, with colleagues in Scotland to make sure that we are, together, operating a system that works for voters.

Secondly, behind the hon. Gentleman's example of e-voting is a point about the powers under which we are doing these pilots that were passed by the previous Labour Government, as I mentioned. Indeed, in the past those powers had also been used by that Government to test e-voting. That is an interesting reflection on the history of how we have been able to come to this point of using powers to look at ways to make the voting system relevant to voters and protect their votes. I am here today principally to talk about how we are protecting their votes. I do not think this is going to turn into a general debate on e-voting, although I should confirm that the Government's manifesto was not in favour of that.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): At the last general election, the Labour candidate in Morecambe and Lunesdale lived in Blackpool and registered herself from her parents' front room in Morecambe. Her husband had actually been the Labour party manager for the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) in the previous election. Is it not time that we had voter ID in Lancaster?

Chloe Smith: I would be delighted to see interest from Lancaster City Council in participating in the pilots. I would like to put on record again how grateful I am to all the local councils that are taking part in them. Some very hard work is being done by administrators to test this important move in our voting system. The example my hon. Friend gives reminds us that there are concerns up and down the country about how well protected our electoral system is, and it is right that we address those.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I have pursued the issue of electoral registration for 18 years in this place. The hundreds of questions that I have tabled show that there is no issue with voter fraud. These are tactics that are used by the right wing in America for voter suppression. May I offer an alternative use for the £20 million that has been allocated for this policy? It should be transferred into getting the missing millions who are not even on the register on to the register.

Chloe Smith: If this is about voter suppression, the Labour party clearly does not want any members, because it uses it for its own party membership. This is not about voter suppression, nor is it about disenfranchisement. I object strongly to the use of those words to describe what is being done. This is a reasonable step to protect

voters' choices. It is simple common sense, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) said, that people should be able to show who they are at the polling station.

I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his campaigning over time on these issues, because he is right to keep consistent scrutiny on how we can help as many people as possible to be registered in this country. I hope he knows that I share his determination to make our registers as complete and accurate as they can be and to have as many people taking part in our elections as possible. Recent figures suggest that we have record levels of electoral registration in this country. They fluctuate slightly throughout electoral cycles, as he will know because he looks at these things closely. The point is that we do have a thriving democracy in this country—let us keep it that way.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): One of the many things about Stirling constituency that I am really proud of is the level of democratic engagement. Turnouts in my constituency are always well above any kind of average that can be picked out of all the statistics that are available on elections. When will the Minister be able to update the House on the specifics of how her Department is trying to drive up engagement in the democratic process across all parts of our society?

Chloe Smith: I look forward very much to being able to do that. I will do it in conjunction with my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) in the coming months, because as Members may know, I shall be taking maternity leave shortly.

In the first instance, I direct my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) to our democratic engagement plan, which sets out the principles of how we intend to engage people and how we will work with partners across the electoral community to do so. Of course, we have to work with colleagues in the devolved Administrations and local councils up and down the country. We are doing that and have set out a range of plans. We will update the House regularly when we have the opportunity to do so. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we will come back with an evaluation of these pilots in due course, as we did last year. We expect the independent Electoral Commission to do the same thing again in the summer period, after the elections.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Let us get this right: the privileged class of MPs can register once in London and once in their constituency and vote twice at local elections, but should this House foolishly allow a second referendum, my constituents who do not have a car and do not have a passport could turn up to vote, having voted in the first referendum, and be sent away to walk back a mile because they do not have a driving licence or a passport, having been told, "You can't vote." And the Government call that democracy. Why is it that I have constituents who have to come to me to get passports? They have no ID of any kind and have been refused a passport, and the only way they can get one is if I intervene. That is the price that will be paid for this absurdity.

Chloe Smith: No, it is not. As I have set out, every council that participates in the pilots will make ID arrangements that are free of charge. That is as the

[Chloe Smith]

House would expect it to be. Frankly, if the situation were as the hon. Gentleman describes it, I would agree with him, but it is not. He is simply not giving an accurate picture of the pilots. Crucially, the 10 pilots, which are being done in slightly different ways across the country, are operating a broader list of ID than only driving licences or passports, and as I have emphasised, there will be a free-of-charge alternative. What I would say to his constituents and to anybody else who is listening is that they need not have that concern. This policy has been well planned, with them at its heart.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—it all comes to those who wait. I was here in 2003, not in the Chamber but up in the Press Gallery, and I listened to the Labour Minister explain why there needed to be voter ID in Northern Ireland. There was a debate in the Chamber at that time. I do not think that that Government could be called right-wing—it was led by Tony Blair, so it could not possibly have been right-wing. At the end of the day, has that been a huge success in Northern Ireland? I can say as a former Minister of State for Northern Ireland, yes it has. Why is it different in Northern Ireland? Why can we not protect votes from being stolen in England, Scotland and Wales?

Chloe Smith: That is absolutely right. My right hon. Friend helpfully reminds us of the history of how we got to this place, and I am grateful to him for placing it on the record. He makes the crucial point that this is about protecting voters. Why should it be acceptable for a voter potentially to be subject to having their vote stolen? That would be a dreadful crime—it is hardly some kind of victimless crime. It is a crime that, unfortunately, does happen in this country, although not in large numbers. That means that we have to act. These are the actions of a responsible Government to make sure that voters have their voice protected.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Following on from the comment of the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), I endorse the remarks that the Minister has made in relation to Northern Ireland. It is absolutely abominable that someone should steal another person's vote. Vote stealing is a serious crime. In the general election of 2001, it was identified that voter fraud in Northern Ireland was a significant issue. It was the Labour Government who—thank goodness—the very next year, in 2002, introduced photographic ID for all elections in Northern Ireland.

Many people in Northern Ireland did not have a passport and many still do not, although, because of Brexit, people are applying for Irish passports in large numbers. For those who do not have a passport or a driving licence, the Electoral Office supplies electoral identity cards free of charge. They are a great idea. Will the Minister confirm that electoral identity cards will be made available free of charge and will be valid for 10 years? They can be used for other purposes, so there is an incentive for voters to acquire them. Given that they are free of charge and are valid for 10 years, people do not have to go for a passport. If people want to meet their constituency MP, of course they can go for a passport, but electoral identity cards are a useful alternative

as ID for all sorts of things, such as Flybe and various other airlines. I am not advertising Flybe—it might not accept them. However, valid ID cards for electoral purposes are enormously useful.

Chloe Smith: I am really pleased that the hon. Lady has contributed the voice of experience. She is correct about the experience in Northern Ireland. She is also correct that such cards have other uses. I give an example from last year's pilots: in one pilot a group of homeless electors—I hope right hon. and hon. Members are aware that it can be difficult for homeless people to vote, which in itself is a separate disgrace that the Government are working to improve—were able to take advantage of the council-issued alternative and go to claim other benefits and take other steps in their lives that they felt were really helpful. She is right that that can happen.

On how we will take the pilots forward into a broader scheme, we are open to looking at what the next steps may be. They may not be identical to the Northern Ireland card, but as I have already emphasised all councils taking part in the pilots will provide a free-of-charge alternative ID that provides some form of verification that voters are who they say they are. That will certainly be a feature, and I will look at all the experiences around the UK as a guide towards the next steps of the programme.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is the Minister aware that the percentage of convictions for ID fraud in votes cast last year—I will read this so that I do not forget a zero—was 0.000002%? While it is clear that we need to treat electoral fraud seriously, will she explain why the same degree of enthusiasm is not shown, for instance, for inquiring into the wide-scale cheating that took place during the EU referendum campaign?

Chloe Smith: The right hon. Gentleman is ever predictable; I thought that might be where his argument would end. I have already touched on the fallacious argument that we should not go after crimes of small numbers. It is a terrible argument.

Tom Brake: I didn't say that.

Chloe Smith: The right hon. Gentleman emphasised how many zeroes came after a decimal point, so I think he was making a point about small numbers. The important thing is this: we need to be able to reassure voters that their votes matter, that their votes are protected and that they can have confidence in the votes they cast.

The right hon. Gentleman went on to make an important point about other elections. People want to have confidence in the result of any election. I say in passing, because this is not about the European referendum, that the Electoral Commission has investigated the allegations to which he refers, and that is part of the system in which voters can have confidence. We have those rules, we have an independent regulator, and we have those investigations. That is what voters should expect of the electoral system, and that independent regulator has also long argued for this reform because it will improve the security of our elections.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Democracy works best when it is easy to participate. The Government are engaged in voter suppression here, so why can we not have more pilots to help people on to the electoral register?

Chloe Smith: I have already said that the Government are absolutely committed to wanting to have as many people as possible registered to vote. I have focused on that relentlessly through the two occasions on which I have held this ministerial post with responsibility for electoral regulation. We need to be able to work with a range of people to do that, and we need to use a range of tools. Yes, we are using pilots to look at ways to secure people's votes, but that goes alongside a very large other body of work to ensure that our democracy thrives and is fit for the 21st century. I would welcome the hon. Gentleman's support in that.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency had the lowest turnout of any UK constituency at the last general election, so for me this is a question of priorities. The Government should be spending much more time and effort on driving up participation in elections, particularly in constituencies such as mine that have a higher than average level of deprivation, rather than spending so much money, resource, time and effort on a relatively trifling issue. We need to focus on the main issue of what the Government will do about driving up voter participation, instead of fanning around with this issue.

Chloe Smith: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman's words might have spoken for themselves. I simply do not agree, nor do I think his constituents or mine would agree, that electoral fraud is "trifling", or that we should not be, to use his words, "fanning around" trying to put a crime right. I am sorry; I think he let himself down with his choice of language. The point underneath it is equally poor. We ought to be able to focus on tackling crime. Voters would expect us to do that. Electoral fraud is a crime, and we are focusing on tackling it. That is to the good of our democracy.

Perhaps the hon. Gentleman was touching on an argument about costs and the choice of expenditure in an electoral system. We would be foolish to try to put a price on democracy. We would be foolish to try to isolate the cost of one measure to protect our overall system compared to any other. I say to him, as I have said to other hon. Members, that all these things together give us a thriving democracy. I have happily committed through the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to ensuring that the costs are available for scrutiny as soon as possible, which is reassuring to all our constituents.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady probably wonders why she is left to the end. I will explain very simply: she came into the Chamber after—quite a long time after—the Minister had started speaking. Strictly, I could say that the hon. Lady should not have an opportunity to put her question, but I do not believe we need to be utterly strict. I am sure she has an important question to ask, so of course she has an opportunity to ask it.

Marsha De Cordova: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Participating in voting should be a right for everybody, and I want to ensure that disabled people do not face any barriers to voting, whether in the upcoming local elections or the potential European elections. I understand that tactile voting devices must be ordered by the deadline, which is today. Will the Minister confirm whether that deadline could be extended to ensure that all disabled people can participate in voting?

Chloe Smith: That is a really good question. To be able to honour the spirit of it properly in answering it, I will confirm to the hon. Lady in writing the precise situation about the ordering deadlines for those devices, should that apply to any potential upcoming elections. I think the House will be well aware of the situation regarding the European parliamentary elections, and I do not think the question is generally about those, but I will be happy to take up that question in more detail.

More broadly, the hon. Lady is right: disabled voters should be as welcome in our system as anyone else. That is a crucial, fundamental tenet of our democracy. I was pleased to meet her to talk through some of these issues, just as I have been keen to meet charities and civil society groups working on behalf of people with disabilities as part of our work to make elections more accessible. The tactile voting devices are but one part of that landscape, but these are vital issues that I want to get right, and I reassure the House that they have been well considered in these pilots.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I would like to point out that the Minister has been extremely good, bouncing up and down to the Dispatch Box, given the imminent arrival of her next child. We all wish her well and hope that it is soon.

Sir Mike Penning: Not too soon.

Madam Deputy Speaker: No, not too soon.

Parental Rights (Rapists) and Family Courts

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.59 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to remove the parental rights of fathers of children conceived through rape; to make provision for an inquiry into the handling by family courts of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls in child arrangement cases; and for connected purposes.

My Bill is to remove the automatic parental right of men who have fathered a child through rape and to establish an inquiry into the treatment of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls in the family courts. The measures I am presenting today were born out of the terrible case of Sammy Woodhouse, which this House is well aware of. Sammy bravely testified against Arshid Hussain in a criminal trial in 2016, and helped to expose the Rotherham grooming scandal. Hussain was convicted, alongside two of his brothers and his uncle, of rape, indecent assault, abduction, false imprisonment and making threats to kill. He was sentenced to 35 years in prison.

During the trial, Sammy voluntarily placed her son under a care order. Because of the stress she was experiencing, she recognised that she was not, at the time, fully capable of looking after him. When the trial concluded, she believed her ordeal with the men who had groomed her as a child was over, but she was wrong. Last year, at a routine variation of her son's care order, Sammy was sitting in court when her social worker turned to her and informed her that notification had been given to Hussain, in prison, informing him of the proceedings and of his right to apply for access to her son. Sammy described to me how she felt at the time: paralysed with fear that the man she thought she would never have to lay eyes on again might walk into the room, and terrified of what her own reaction would be if he did. She genuinely could not guarantee that she would not attack him.

Sammy actually considers herself lucky, if such a word can be used of someone who has been through what she has, because Hussain did not attend court that day, although months after the court process had finished, Rotherham Council once again approached Hussain in prison to encourage contact with her son, without even notifying Sammy it was doing so. It is inconceivable to anyone with any sympathy, empathy or a drop of common sense that Hussain was in effect encouraged to apply to the court. Had he been so minded, he could have used the court as a weapon to cross-examine Sammy and to traumatise her and her children all over again.

Sammy and I have met the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer). Sammy has met Rotherham Council, and we have sought legal advice on whether it acted appropriately and within the law. Astonishingly, the received view is that her case would not have been considered exceptional enough, despite the fact that case law states the court can rule that individuals should not be notified if they present a safeguarding risk to parent or child. It is difficult to imagine how anyone could have posed a greater threat

to Sammy or her son than Arshid Hussain. That is why the law clearly needs to change. We need to flip the presumption that anyone who has fathered a child through rape should be encouraged to apply for access regardless of the risk they present by removing that automatic right and allowing the courts to grant access, in exceptional circumstances, only if it is in the clear interest of the welfare of the child.

In my initial response to this case, I recommended to the Government an amendment to the Children Act 1989 to remove the parental right of any man who has fathered a child through rape. The Government's argument, regrettably, was that this would undermine the convicted rapist's article 8 right to a family life. I am afraid that this is nonsense. This is a qualified right, and no one could conclude that his rights should supersede the safeguarding concerns of mother or child.

I do, however, understand the concerns raised about how my suggestion could undermine the vital principle that the welfare of the child should always be paramount, so, in consultation with Sir James Munby, the former president of the family court, we have developed alternative proposals that would maintain the paramountcy principle, while protecting victims of rape and their children. Requiring a father who has fathered a child through rape to obtain the permission of the court before applying for a section 8 order, or requiring the court to presume, unless the contrary is shown, that involvement of such an individual will be contrary to the child's welfare should satisfy those two tests. You would not think we had to be so explicit in primary legislation with the courts, but the sad fact is that Sammy's and other women's experience demonstrates to us that we must. I am incredibly grateful to Sir James and survivors alongside Sammy who have worked with me on these proposals, and I believe that there is now simply no reason why the Government should not urgently accept them.

My Bill goes further than this specific legislative change. The family courts are private—and rightly so, to protect the children that they must safeguard—but it is precisely this privacy that puts some women at risk. Sammy herself risked contempt of court in speaking out about her story. I have had constituents told by their solicitors that they will no longer represent them because they have been to their MP to ask for help. I have sought to establish how widespread a problem the issue of convicted rapists gaining access to their children is, but no data is collected to allow scrutiny of the courts and their decisions. This is not the case in the criminal courts, where we know outcomes, we can scrutinise data and we can establish if legislation is being properly upheld, but we cannot know that in the family courts.

Pioneering research by Women's Aid found clear examples of family courts prioritising domestic abusers' rights over survivors' and children's rights to life and to be free from degrading treatment. Its report, "Nineteen Child Homicides", revealed the deaths of 19 children following contact granted to men who were known abusers. This research led to the updating of practice direction 12J, which provides protection for victims of domestic abuse and harm. This should be sufficient and it should be followed, but campaigners and survivors have concerns that it is not being followed and that contact is still being granted inappropriately. It should not be down to charities to expose these issues at the heart of our justice system, so I believe we need an

independent inquiry to establish the level of this discrimination in the courts and what needs to be done to address it.

We, as politicians, must never interfere with the independence of the judiciary. We must trust that it will always follow the spirit of the law that we make in this place and that it will take decisions that will protect victims and their children. However, just last week comments by Mr Justice Hayden came to light that were deeply concerning and betrayed an attitude that we had hoped was safely buried in the judiciary—that women are somehow owned by their partners, that we are inferior to men and that we do not have the same rights and certainly cannot exercise them through the courts. He said:

“I cannot think of any more obviously fundamental human right than the right of a man to have sex with his wife”.

This view will, I am confident, not be shared by the vast majority of the judiciary, but it points to wider concerns about attitudes and understanding on violence against women and girls that are clearly barriers to improving the court’s response to these crimes.

While secrecy in institutions prevails, it is the very health of our democracy and the rights of our citizens that are at risk. The relationship between those who make decisions and those whom decisions are made about need not rest on blind trust. In fact, a healthy scepticism—challenging, scrutinising, protesting—is the hallmark of a democracy in good health. However, to achieve that, the scales need to be, as much as possible, evenly weighted between the people and those in power—between the institutions of the state and those that are subject to them. That is why, periodically, when there is deep public concern, it is appropriate to launch an inquiry on behalf of the public to get to the truth.

For family courts and cases involving domestic abuse, there is a fear that, beneath the shroud of secrecy, there is injustice. The women and children we are talking about are some of the most vulnerable in our society. Women such as Sammy have already been let down by the state time and again. We, as public servants, owe it to them to reward the bravery of those who have dared to speak out. We cannot allow their voices to continue to go unheard, silenced and ignored, and we cannot

perpetuate a system that discriminates against them and potentially places them and their children in harm’s way. It is time for the voices of those who have suffered in silence for too long to finally be heard.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Louise Haigh, Sir Nicholas Soames, Eddie Hughes, Mrs Maria Miller, Glyn Davies, Kevin Hollinrake, Jess Phillips, Philip Davies, Layla Moran, Sir Mike Penning, Jim Shannon and Sir Kevin Barron present the Bill.

Louise Haigh accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 378).

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During the excellent 10-minute rule Bill speech by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) there was commentary going on not from inside the Chamber itself, but from somewhere else. That was completely inappropriate considering the importance of the Bill. Can you investigate—I am sure you are already—why that was going on and make sure it does not happen again?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that point. He is correct. I was also aware that there were voices somewhere in this Chamber which I could not see. I know it was not any disruption in the Public Gallery and there was no one in the side Galleries. I have already asked for an investigation to take place, but if he, or indeed anyone else in the Chamber, has seen parts of this Chamber which I am unable to see and has an idea of where that noise is coming from, I would be grateful if they would tell me. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. It is totally inappropriate, especially when a Member is speaking on a sensitive subject and there is silence in the Chamber because everybody in here is listening intently to the hon. Lady, as they were a few minutes ago, that there should be noise from some other part of this Chamber. If I find out what exactly happened, I will inform the Chamber, the hon. Lady and the right hon. Gentleman.

Constitutional Law

2.11 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I beg to move,

That the draft Regulatory Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 (Consequential Modifications) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 4 March, be approved.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to debate this order this afternoon, Madam Deputy Speaker. The order is made in consequence of the Regulatory Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, which I shall refer to as the 2014 Act and which received Royal Assent on 19 February 2014. Some may say the matter we are debating—essentially regulatory alignment between two routes of appeal under two separate pieces of legislation—is very minor, but the provisions have come from the Scottish Government’s very welcome distinctive Better Regulation agenda, which is based on principles of requiring regulation to be transparent, accountable, proportionate, consistent and targeted. If we assent to the regulations today, we will remove a disparity that could cause delay and cost to people seeking remedies under particular Acts.

The order is made under section 104 of the Scotland Act 1998, which allows for necessary or expedient legislative provision in consequence of an Act of the Scottish Parliament. In this case, a provision is required in consequence of the aforementioned 2014 Act. I have talked about what has driven the requirement for better regulation. We have seen in all four nations a desire for better and more proportionate regulation. I think we all agree that that is required and it creates a more benign business environment for investors. In this case, which pertains to energy installations, it can deliver benefits for the environment.

The 2014 Act accelerated the procedure by which certain appeals are determined: first, appeals in respect of decisions taken on applications for consent for energy-generating station development; and, secondly, appeals against a decision to hold a public inquiry with respect to such applications for consent. If there is a challenge on those particular issues, the order will ensure that the same appeal mechanism applies whether there is a challenge against a decision of the Scottish Ministers on either an application for a marine licence or on an application for a section 36 consent for energy developments within Scottish internal waters, territorial sea and the Scottish part of the renewable energy zone—REZ. The order ensures that by making two amendments to the Electricity Act 1989 to extend a statutory appeals procedure to the Scottish part of the REZ. It does so by substituting a new definition of “relevant waters” to include those waters in the Scottish part of the REZ.

I note that a change to the definition of “relevant waters” was inserted into the 1989 Act by an earlier order in 2015, with the intention of providing for the statutory appeal. However, the change related only to renewable energy installations to be sited in Scottish internal waters and the territorial sea adjacent to Scotland, not the REZ.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the geographical location is based on where the turbine or renewable energy is located, rather than the company, the licence holder or any applicant?

Claire Perry: I believe that it is based on the location of the site, but I will double-check that and write to the hon. Gentleman to confirm it.

The order ensures that the statutory appeal is now also available to the section 36 consent applications in the Scottish part of the REZ, thereby fulfilling the policy of providing the expedited appeals procedure for decisions on section 36 consents on which Scottish Ministers have executive devolved functions and control. The order therefore might seem very small but is actually an important amendment and correction to the 2015 order.

For information, the instrument was laid one week after another related instrument, the Scotland Act 1998 (Transfer of Functions to the Scottish Ministers etc.) Order 2019. That order was passed by the House of Commons on 2 April. The effect of that order is to confirm that environmental impact assessment regulatory functions connected to energy consent within the Scottish part of the REZ are available to Scottish Ministers.

The UK Government and the Scottish Government, as is always our desire and intent, have worked closely together to ensure that the order makes the necessary amendments in consequence of the 2014 Act. I believe it demonstrates once again that the UK Government remain committed to strengthening the devolution settlement and that Scotland’s two Governments are working well together. As indicated, the order might be small, but it is absolutely necessary. I hope all Members agree that the practical result is something to be welcomed. I therefore commend the order to the House.

2.16 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I do not plan to detain the House for long, as the order before us is purely technical in nature. It is necessary to amend previous legislation with regards to the Scottish section of the renewable energy zone and to correct amendments that were previously made to the Electricity Act 1989 by the Regulatory Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 (Consequential Modifications) Order 2015.

As part of the 2015 order, there was an oversight in its definition of “relevant waters”. It did not include the Scottish section of the renewable energy zone. The order before us today corrects that oversight and will ensure that the same appeals mechanism applies where there is a challenge against a decision of Scottish Ministers on application for a marine licence in relation to an energy-generating station or site development that would be situated in Scottish internal waters, territorial sea or the Scottish section of the REZ.

We all know the benefits that renewable energy can bring to our society and ultimately our planet, which is why I am delighted that the Labour party is committed to a green industrial revolution and fully committed to our target of net zero emissions by 2050. In Scotland, we are all too familiar with what happens when infrastructure projects of a crucial nature, such as renewable energy, are delayed due to court challenges. In fact, the man who now sits in the Oval Office of the White House and is known as the President of the United States is among the more prominent individuals who have challenged offshore renewable infrastructure projects because they happen to dislike the physical or visual impact of them on their golf courses. The order should

prevent court challenges of this kind being dragged out and accelerate the procedure by which appeals are determined by fast-tracking legal challenges to minimise the impact of delays on such infrastructure projects.

The Labour party will not oppose the order because, as I said, it is a necessary but simple technical amendment and correction to the 2015 order.

2.18 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I rise to give my support to this statutory instrument, brought before the House in the name of the Secretary of State for Scotland. It is important because it is about facilitating twin areas of vital national interest: the need for us to continue to support the efficient development of cheap, clean energy generation; and the crying-out-loud need for us to double down on our efforts to stick to hitting our legally binding carbon reduction budgets. Scotland is playing a massive role in giving the UK a lead on clean energy in the G7. That is not just something to take quiet satisfaction from; it is something to shout from the rooftops. In short, that is why I wanted to speak in support of this SI. Yes, it is about a couple of technical amendments, but they point towards a couple of greater things that need to be highlighted.

The first is perhaps a little subtle, but it is significant—it is a political and constitutional point. The SNP in this place and elsewhere—in fact, everywhere that it is given a platform or a microphone—will go on and on about how outrageous everything is and how blatant the UK Government are in their dealings with Scottish interests, saying that they do not listen, they do not co-operate, and so on. My Scottish Conservative and Unionist colleagues in this House and I bear the brunt of this kind of rhetoric through the vile abuse that we receive from fundamentalist nationalists. A Cabinet Secretary in the Scottish Government even called us all traitors—yes, a Cabinet Secretary.

The truth is a very long way away from that kind of bare-faced politicking. It needs to be said and this SI illustrates it well: there is actually a very good working relationship between the SNP Scottish Government and the Conservative and Unionist UK Government. Privately, the Scottish Government's Ministers get on with getting on with the UK Government. While things can always be improved upon—as Members will know, I have many ideas about how that might be done—the day-to-day business of co-operating and collaborating is going on, largely insulated from the faux rage and grievance manufacturing of the SNP.

I was talking to an SNP Member the other day—someone I quite like and respect—who said something to the effect that we always disagree on everything. I said, “No, we actually agree on a lot of things a lot of the time.” That Member said to me, “Whatever you do, don't tell my supporters in my constituency that.” That sums up the SNP attitude for me.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): How is the hon. Gentleman getting on with encouraging his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland to ensure that Ministers are rolling back on the cuts to onshore wind subsidies, which is obviously a crucial industry for Scotland and the hon. Gentleman's constituency?

Stephen Kerr: I will come on to say something specifically about the importance of this sector, particularly for the Scottish economy, but the important thing that I am trying to say about this SI is that it brings about harmonisation. Harmonisation is something that I am very much in favour of—I say, up with that sort of thing. Whenever it is possible—and it nearly always is, despite what we would imagine from listening to the noises from those on the SNP Benches—the people of Scotland expect their two Governments to work together for the commonweal and they want to see that partnering in action. This SI is a good example of that. It might not go down well with the SNP fundamentalists in the conference hall, but I am afraid that the reality is not always the perception that people want to hold on to for the sake of stoking political prejudice.

The second thing I want to mention is how strategically important the offshore wind energy sector is in Scotland, and this SI facilitates it. May I say how much I welcomed last month's announcement of the offshore wind sector deal? It spells out the ambition of the industry and the UK Government to produce a third of British electricity from offshore wind by 2030. Environmentalists in my Stirling constituency say that the UK Government do not get enough credit for the work that they are doing on sustainable energy sources.

The sector deal clearly states the ambition to make the UK a global leader in renewables, with more investment potential than any other country in the world, as a part of our modern industrial strategy. It spells out the ambition of the offshore wind energy industry, with its investment of £250 million—including a new offshore wind growth partnership—to develop the UK supply chain, as global exports are set to increase fivefold to £2.6 billion by 2030. That deal will mean for the first time in our history that more electricity will be generated from renewables than fossil fuels, with 70% of British electricity predicted to be from low carbon sources by 2030 and over £40 billion of infrastructure investment in the UK. I am proud that Scotland is at the forefront of it all.

The UK offshore energy sector has massive potential. There is a significant appetite for new offshore wind energy, and investors are willing to put their money to work investing in Scotland. We need infrastructure and policies that allow development, and we need all levels of Government—local, Scottish and UK-wide—to be fully seized of the opportunity and the moment. The fact that this SI brings the different levels of Government together to ensure a smooth process for applicants and a fair process for interested parties is to be welcomed. It is to the credit of the UK Government and the Scottish Government, who are working together because by working together we can achieve great things for the people of Scotland. Seeing this SI through is what this Government ultimately stand for, in terms of our attitude towards making the Union work for all its people. I welcome the SI's passage through the House today.

2.25 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). He has made my day and cheered me up—honestly, I had to check my notes to see whether I was in the right debate or whether he was, because we seemed to go slightly off topic. It also seems strange to complain

[Alan Brown]

about SNP complaints, while continuing to put the boot into the SNP—so, that was hypocrisy writ large. However, I take his point: where they can, it is good that the two Governments work well together. He kept talking about this good working relationship. He did not answer the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) about how the Secretary of State for Scotland is currently blocking the development of onshore wind in Scotland. I want to challenge the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, who is at the Dispatch Box—if she could look up, please. Her Department and the Secretary of State for Scotland have refused to release correspondence between the two Departments where it is quite clear that he has voiced his objections. For full transparency, will they release this information so that what the Scottish Secretary is doing to block onshore wind in Scotland is out there in the public domain?

Let me turn to the SI. Its title on the Order Paper is “Constitutional Law (Motion)” —how grand does that sound? No wonder a constitutional law motion is in the main Chamber. Then we look at paragraph 2.1 of the explanatory notes:

“The purpose of this...is...to correct amendments made to the Electricity Act 1989”.

Paragraph 6.3 states:

“This instrument is made to correct an oversight in the 2015 Order by amending the definition of ‘relevant waters’ in section 36D(6) of, and paragraph 5B(6) of Schedule 8 to, the 1989 Act”.

Paragraph 14.1 on monitoring and review states:

“The instrument will achieve its policy objective of amending a legislative oversight and therefore monitoring and review are not required.”

This is a simple, technical amendment, as has been said, so why it is in the main Chamber? It is a complete farce and another indication of this zombie Government who have nothing to do because everything is stalled because of Brexit. We keep hearing about getting on with the day job, but it is quite clear that the Government are not getting on with their day job and that everything is stalled. We had a similar SI in a normal Delegated Legislation Committee and it took 10 minutes. Partly because the hon. Member for Stirling talked longer than the two Front-Bench spokespersons, we have thankfully managed to drag this out, and I am doing my wee bit to drag it out in the main Chamber as well.

That said, we welcome the streamlining of this process for challenging Scottish Ministers’ decisions about marine licence applications. As the hon. Gentleman was good enough to say, the Scottish Government are a world leader in the fight against climate change and in advancing renewable energy. The Scottish Government want to have 50% of all energy sources supplied by renewables by 2030. It does figure that it would be much better for the Scottish Government to have even greater powers over energy policy and for that not be blocked by the likes of the Secretary of State for Scotland.

In Scotland, we have the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney, which is also a world leader, with the world’s largest tidal stream array and the world’s most powerful tidal stream turbine. A recent announcement heralds the world’s first centre aimed at accelerating the development of materials and structures for tidal energy, which will be based in Rosyth. It is a collaboration

between Babcock and the University of Edinburgh. The FASTBLADE project is worth £2.4 million, so we look forward to seeing that being developed. What funds, if any, will the Government provide for that and for future projects? I note that the offshore wind sector deal gives the University of Hull £5.5 million for its technology development. We should like to see the same provision for marine development in Scotland.

When will the Government change the regulations on the Electricity Act 1989 to define electricity storage as a distinct subset of generation? That change will facilitate the co-location of batteries with renewable energy, as the Minister acknowledged in a parliamentary answer in March and in another last week. She described the amendment as “an important measure” and said that it would be implemented “when parliamentary time allows.” I suggest that a full debate in the main Chamber provides sufficient parliamentary time to amend the regulations. That is part of the day job that the Government should be getting on with.

The Government also need to move away from their obsession with nuclear power. It is too dear; it is a dead duck; and it is clear that investors are walking away from it. I do not understand why they continue down that path.

We welcome the corrections of the previous oversight. They should mean that the appeal process is clear, within the remit of Scottish Ministers, and within the remit of the Scottish legal jurisdiction. The intention of the 2014 Act was to streamline the planning application and appeal process for renewable energy to facilitate business deployment and to give investors more certainty. We therefore welcome this measure, which has been agreed with Scottish Ministers. As the Minister said in her opening remarks, better regulation is good for everyone.

2.31 pm

Claire Perry: I think we have seen an outbreak of consensus, which is always welcome on the Floor of the House. I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and commend him on his tartan tie: I feel that I am a little underdressed for this debate.

The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who is no longer in the Chamber, asked me to confirm that the Act applies to the geography of the site and not to the business location. I can confirm that to the House.

I was delighted when my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) raised our eyes beyond this narrow definition of the law to the real prize, asking what we could do to facilitate our ongoing leadership in the decarbonisation agenda. The answer is much more. I was also delighted by his support for the offshore wind sector deal, which is utterly transformational. We have the best location in the world for offshore wind generation in terms of wind speed and the shallowness of the marine basin. As he knows, there is an important opportunity for the transfer of skills from the world-leading oil and gas industry to offshore wind generation as part of the transition.

There is, of course, a series of questions to be asked about onshore wind. One concerns the size of wind farms. I have debated that subject many times with Opposition Members, but I should point out that the

Scottish Government's own analysis shows that more than 2GW of wind is already at the planning stage. Not all of that will come to fruition, but we are engaged in an enormous process of re-powering and upgrading existing onshore wind farms.

My hon. Friend also mentioned—and this is absolutely my experience as well—that the day-to-day working relationships with the Ministers in the devolved Administration are excellent. I chair a quadrilateral meeting which we hold regularly to discuss Brexit preparations, and our conversations are professional and focus on working together. There is a great deal of trust. Like the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), I would far rather see harmonisation than dissent in such conversations. It is always dispiriting that we almost never hear his party welcome any of the progress that the UK Government are making. *[Interruption.]* I am afraid that his speech was delivered in such a welter of negativity that I may not have picked it up.

Alan Brown *rose*—

Claire Perry: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman and allow him to congratulate our four nations on the progress that they have made.

Alan Brown: The Minister is obviously not familiar with my personality. That is how I deliver compliments—in amongst that wave of negativity.

What I was going to ask the Minister was this. Will the Government release the correspondence between the Secretary of State for Scotland and her Department, rather than hiding behind the freedom of information exemption, claiming that it is Government policy formulation?

Claire Perry: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will regain his usual sunny nature should we have an Easter break next week. As he will know, what he has asked is not for me to decide. These observations are made to the Secretary of State, and it would be wrong for me to comment.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Sweeney *rose*—

Claire Perry: I will give way again briefly, but I sense that the House would like me to wrap up, and I also want to give way to the Leader of the Opposition. *[Laughter.]* I mean the potential future Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East.

Neil Gray: If the Minister was so keen for the correspondence to be released, she could just release it and publish it now. She does not have to wait for an FOI inquiry.

Claire Perry: As I have said, it not my decision, and it is not correspondence of which I have been informed.

Mr Sweeney *rose*—

Claire Perry: I will now give way to my shadow—in this particular instance—on the Opposition Front Bench.

Mr Sweeney: We should not tempt fate.

The Minister has made an important point: it is frustrating that the Secretary of State for Scotland is not here to make his comments directly and, perhaps, shed more light on the issues that Members have raised. She also made an important point about the opportunity to exploit renewable potential in the coastal waters of the United Kingdom. However, that is not being matched with an effort to build the British industrial base on renewables. We are seeing significant threats to major industrial capacity such as a BiFab project in Scotland for the industrial development of renewables. We may be in danger of losing that opportunity altogether. Is it not incumbent on the Minister and, indeed, on her Scottish counterparts to redouble their efforts to maximise British industrial content and renewable manufacturing projects?

Claire Perry: I welcome the opportunity to reassure the hon. Gentleman that the offshore wind sector deal focuses on exactly that. What had happened historically was that we had essentially given out contracts for difference without requiring developers who were taking advantage of them to commit themselves to UK supply chain investment. What I have set out in the sector deal is that in return for terming out the auctions to a 10-year look ahead, which will give us the most secure market look-ahead in this sector in the world, we expect UK content to rise to more than 60% of the supply chain. The hon. Gentleman made an important point about BiFab. We have, of course, worked closely with the Scottish Government throughout that process. It has been another example of very co-operative working.

There is another important point to be made about the sector deal: I should like workforce diversity to improve dramatically. We have set a target of over 30% of the jobs in that sector going to women.

I think I have covered all the points that I wanted to cover. I commend the order, but I also commend what I think will be a marvellous slogan for politics in the future: up with harmonisation, and down with dissent!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I do not know whether the Minister will secure total agreement with that one.

Question put and agreed to.

Continuous At-Sea Deterrent

2.38 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 50th anniversary of the continuous at sea deterrent.

Half a century ago, HMS Resolution glided into the Clyde and sailed into the history books. That was the start of our longest sustained military operation—Operation Relentless—and the beginning of our continuous at-sea deterrent. Since then, there has always been a Royal Navy ballistic missile submarine at sea protecting our nation, and thousands of submariners have followed in the wake of Resolution's crew conducting vital work, unseen and undetected, every minute of every day. Today, it is for the House to pay tribute to those brave men and women, past and present, who have helped to make this operation so successful.

We already honour our submariners with a deterrent patrol pin—often known as the bomber pin—giving recognition to their enormous efforts, but we want to go further still. Consequently, we are going to ensure that those who complete 10 patrols will now be recognised with the new silver bomber pin. Future bomber pins will be made from metal taken from HMS Resolution, linking today's submariners with their forefathers and emphasising the longevity and the significance of the 50-year mission.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I congratulate the Defence Secretary on bringing such an important debate to the House at this time. Does he recognise that there is a case for going even further and making all those who served on bomber patrol eligible for a service medal, given the extraordinary nature of what they have contributed?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and it is something that I would be willing to look at. I am sure he is aware that it is not, sadly, a decision purely for the Ministry of Defence, but we would certainly be happy to look at the merits of that and how we give full recognition to all the crews that have served over such a long period.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way, for his welcome announcement and for his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). I am not cavilling, but will he try to ensure that these medals are made in the UK, please?

Gavin Williamson: I would be very disappointed if they were not to be made in the United Kingdom. My understanding is that the bomber pins are manufactured here in the United Kingdom.

Even as we pay tribute to the submariners, it is equally important that we think of their families, too—those who often have to go for months on end without hearing from their loved ones. We must also pay tribute to the thousands of industry experts who have played a vital role in this national endeavour.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I wonder how the Secretary of State thinks we can possibly lecture other countries about not seeking to acquire

nuclear weapons. What moral high ground do we have to do that if we ourselves not only possess them but are upgrading them? Does he really think the world would be a safer place if every country had nuclear weapons, and if that is not the case, how on earth do we justify what we are doing?

Gavin Williamson: I firmly believe that the world is a safer place because we have a nuclear deterrent and because of the responsible way that it is deployed.

Caroline Lucas: But would the world be safer if all countries had them?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady and I will probably always find room for disagreement on this. I will come on to the issue of deterrence later.

I want to make progress, because it would be remiss of me not to mention the town of Barrow-in-Furness and give our thanks to the people of Barrow, who have crafted these giants of the deep and continue to do so, ensuring that we have the right technology and the right vessels to deliver our nuclear deterrent.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the way in which he is introducing the debate. The question about other countries possessing nuclear weapons takes me back to the old arguments where we used to ask people to name a single country that would either acquire nuclear weapons because we had got them, or get rid of them if we decided unilaterally to get rid of ours. Do you know what? They never came up with the name of one country.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab) *rose*—

Gavin Williamson: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is going to mention such a country, but I give way to him.

Mr Cunningham: I am certainly not going to mention such a country. I was going to ask the Secretary of State about the welfare of the ex-submariners and how they are looked after. Specifically, is it covered by the covenant, which a Labour Government introduced?

Gavin Williamson: I think we on the Government side of the House can be duly proud of the work that has been done since 2010 on ensuring that veterans of all three services are properly looked after; submariners are equally covered by that.

It is important to understand the remarkable engineering that goes into these remarkably sophisticated submarines, whose level of sophistication matches that of a spacecraft. It is only fitting that this debate marks the start of a series of events designed to commemorate such dedicated and continuous service not only from the submariners, but from the industry and the communities that have supported the deterrent.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): As a son of a submariner, I know how important it is that we thank those people who served on submarines. Speaking as the MP for Devonport, however, may I ask the Secretary of State whether he agrees that we should pay special thanks to all those people in Devonport

who have, over many decades, refitted our nuclear submarines and ensured that they are operational, so that they can continue to provide the at-sea deterrent? Without the work of those specialist skilled engineers, we would not have CASD today.

Gavin Williamson: If I recall correctly, 1,000 people in Plymouth are dependent for their jobs and livelihoods on supporting our nuclear submarines. I would very much like to add my thanks to them for the work that they do. That also demonstrates the important benefit that our nuclear deterrent provides for the whole country in jobs and skills.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend, in this geographic tour of areas that support the at-sea deterrent, was coming on to talk about Aldermaston, in the part of west Berkshire that I represent, and the surrounding area. Thousands of people work in that centre of excellence for science and engineering, the benefits of which spread into the economy, into areas that have nothing to do with the nuclear deterrent. That has been of huge benefit to this country.

Gavin Williamson: It is absolutely right that my right hon. Friend mentions Aldermaston and the work that it does on our continued ability to develop our nuclear deterrent, to ensure that we remain ahead of the game. That also has an enormous benefit to the whole wider economy, and not only in the development of skills. This investment has an impact on science and technology, keeping us ahead of the game and ahead of our rivals.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State makes an important point about the industrial contribution that our shipbuilding industry makes; I have worked for the company that builds our nation's submarines and naval ships, so I am all too aware of how important that impact is. However, the construction of these ships and submarines is dependent on in-year financing, which really disrupts the ability to build the infrastructure that will serve these ships throughout their life cycle. How are we going to change the way in which ships are financed by the Treasury to ensure that we give them proper project financing, so that the companies involved can build the world-class infrastructure needed to build submarines and ships for the future?

Gavin Williamson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will deal with it and then make some progress, because there is a lot of interest in the House and many hon. Members want to speak. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and it is why the Government have set aside £31 billion to deliver the Dreadnought programme and ensure that we have continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence. We have also built in a contingency, because we are very conscious that we want to provide security confidence that the programme will deliver within budget and on time.

It is important that we pay our thanks to those who have served on the submarines, to families and to the whole industry. Next month, there will be the Westminster Abbey service recognising the commitment of our submariners. In July, there will be a parade at Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde, and at the end of the November, there will be a special memorial commemoration at Edinburgh Castle.

However, today's debate is important because it gives us the opportunity to underline why the deterrent still matters so much to the United Kingdom, why it remains very much at the heart of our national security policy and why it has been one of the rare issues to command popular support across both sides of the House. It is an important point to make that the continuous at-sea deterrent has been supported by both Conservative and Labour Governments continuously over the last few decades; I certainly hope that it will be for many decades into the future.

The doubters who persist in believing that the deterrent is simply a cold war relic need to be reminded of three salient points. First and foremost, the nuclear dangers have not gone away; on the contrary, the geopolitical situation is more unstable than ever before. We are facing challenges that are growing in scale, complexity and diversity. Russia is rebuilding its nuclear arsenal. It has breached the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty and, in Europe, has now deployed new nuclear-capable missile systems to target and threaten the west. It also continues to develop and adapt its doctrine to give primacy to nuclear weapons. North Korea is the only state to have detonated a nuclear weapon in the 21st century. Despite positive dialogue, its weapons remain intact. We hope it will return to compliance with its obligations under the non-proliferation treaty. The point is that both Russia and North Korea have shown their willingness to rattle the nuclear sabre in the past.

There are no indications that those dangers will disappear any time soon, so we cannot relax our guard. While there is the risk of other states developing weapons, we must have a credible response to that threat. Our independent nuclear deterrent—our nuclear weapons posture—gives us defences against such actions. It is our ultimate insurance policy. It protects us every day from the most extreme threats to our national security and our way of life. Beyond that, it gives future generations greater strategic options and the power to protect themselves into the 2060s and beyond, whatever may lie round the corner.

As was recognised at last year's NATO summit in Brussels, the UK's nuclear deterrent provides a critical contribution to our alliance. Since 1962, the UK has assigned all our nuclear forces to NATO's defence. That 50-year commitment to the defence and security of every member of that great alliance is as strong today as it has ever been in the past. All member states benefit from that capability, which gives the alliance another centre of decision making to complicate the calculations of our adversaries.

In fact, many allies signed the non-proliferation treaty in the late 1960s safe in knowledge they would be covered by the nuclear umbrella that the United Kingdom provides for them. Those who argue that we should disarm should consider whether such a move would actually make nuclear proliferation more, rather than less, likely. We cannot blame others, such as the United States, for questioning why they should be paying the price for protecting us from nuclear threats.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My constituency is the home of GCHQ, which has unprecedented and unparalleled security co-operation and intelligence sharing with the United States. Does the Secretary of State agree that the UK's commitment to the continuous

[Alex Chalk]

at-sea nuclear deterrent is one of the foundation stones of that strong relationship, which keeps our people safe?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I will touch on later. Our nuclear deterrent is a cornerstone of that long and enduring relationship. The United States does not have such a relationship with another country anywhere on this Earth. That close collaboration makes us and our allies safer.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Gavin Williamson: I will make some progress. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that.

The extent to which our deterrent underpins our special relationship with the United States must never be underplayed. We should be proud of the fact we are one of the few nations with both strategic nuclear and conventional carrier capabilities. We should be proud that those strengths give the United Kingdom influence not just in NATO but across the world, giving us the capability to influence events in our interest and stand up for our values and the United Kingdom.

My third point is that there are simply no credible alternatives to the submarine-based deterrent. Some claim that there are cheaper and more effective ways of providing a similar effect to the Trident system, but we have been down that road many times before. Successive studies by both Labour and Conservative Administrations have shown that there are no other alternatives. Most recently, the Trident alternatives review of 2013 found that submarines are less vulnerable to attack than silos or aircraft and can maintain a continuous posture in a way that aircraft and land-based alternatives cannot. Their missiles have greater range and capability than other alternative delivery systems. Overall, the review concluded that a minimum, credible, assured and independent deterrent requires nuclear submarines with ballistic missiles.

John Spellar: The Secretary of State is making a very compelling argument. Does he not therefore regret the dithering and delay that took place in the renewal of the submarine programme when the Conservatives were in coalition, at the behest of the Liberal Democrats, who have not even bothered to turn up today?

Gavin Williamson: We could spend a long time debating the Liberal Democrats, but it would probably be a waste of time. I am exceptionally proud of the fact that this Government have committed to a nuclear deterrent, and that in 2015 so many colleagues from both sides of the House united in one Lobby to make sure we delivered it.

Neil Gray *rose*—

Gavin Williamson: I see that a very excitable member of the SNP is keen to make a point.

Neil Gray: We were not in that Lobby, funnily enough. I struggle to see the logic in arguing for multilateral disarmament while simultaneously rearming unilaterally.

My question to the Secretary of State is this: how many nuclear submarines have been successfully decommissioned since 1980? The answer is none, isn't it?

Gavin Williamson: We are intending to see the first decommissioning of submarines over the coming year. That important issue needs to be addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) and the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) have been looking at it and have made some very important contributions. It is an issue that the Ministry of Defence takes very seriously. I was hoping—this was obviously very naive of me—that the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) was going to talk about Scotland's pride at being the home of our submarine forces, about the economic benefit that our continuous at-sea nuclear benefit delivers Scotland, about the fact that 6,800 people are employed at Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde and about the fact that that will increase to 8,500. It is disappointing that he could not talk with a bit of pride about the service personnel who contribute so much. This is about saying thank you, to the submariners who have continuously put their lives at risk and done so much for our nation to keep us safe. I hope that all Members in this House, regardless of their view about the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, will have the courtesy to pay tribute to those brave men and women. We cannot wish away the rise of the atomic bomb, especially given that there are some 14,500 nuclear weapons on this Earth. That is not to say we have given up our determination to create a nuclear-free world. On the contrary, we have been at the forefront of arms reduction. Since the height of the cold war, the United Kingdom has reduced our forces by more than 50%. We have delivered on our commitment to reduce the number of warheads carried by our Vanguard submarines from 48 to 40, and we have decreased the number of operationally available warheads to no more than 120.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Gavin Williamson: I have given the hon. Lady the opportunity to speak.

We remain committed to reducing our stockpile to no more than 180 warheads by the mid-2020s, but the reality is that other nations have not taken the hint from the lead that the United Kingdom has shown. Even as we have cut back, others are creating new systems to get around treaty obligations or are simply ignoring the commitments that they have made. I have already spoken about Russia's breach of the INF treaty. The truth is that the only way to create the global security conditions necessary for nuclear disarmament is by working multilaterally. Our commitment to the deterrent is cast-iron.

We are spending around £4 billion every year to ensure the ultimate guarantee of our safety for the next 50 years, not least by investing in the next generation of ballistic missile submarines—the Dreadnought class. We have made significant progress. We have already named three of the state-of-the-art submarines—Dreadnought, Valiant and Warspite. Construction has already started in Barrow on HMS Dreadnought. Those names recall some of the greatest ships of our naval history. We are investing millions of pounds in state-of-the-art facilities and complex nuclear propulsion systems,

and we are ensuring every day counts by utilising our Dreadnought contingency, with access to up to £1 billion, to fund more in the early years to drive out cost and risk later in the programme.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Secretary of State speaks of getting around obligations. Can he clarify why the MOD stopped publishing the official safety ratings report from Trident's watchdog, the Defence Nuclear Safety Regulator, for the past two years? Is it trying to cover up the rise in safety incidents instead of taking proper action to fix them now?

Gavin Williamson: Safety is at the core and at the very heart of everything we do at the Ministry of Defence and through all three of our services and with our industrial partners. That is very much the focus that we will always have going into the future.

John Woodcock: The Secretary of State has been very generous with his time. Does not the incident in Barrow today underline the fact that the shipwrights who are involved in constructing the Royal Navy's submarines in Barrow and across the country are performing a vital service for the nation, which is not always without risk?

Gavin Williamson: This is a national endeavour. We often talk, rightly, about those who are serving in the Royal Navy, but it is supported by the other two services. The Royal Air Force, through the P8 Poseidon submarine-hunting aircraft, and the surface fleet of the Royal Navy are all making sure that our deterrents are safe. Of course, those workers in Barrow are constructing some of the world's finest submarines to take to the seas, and our gratitude is deep.

We must not forget the 30,000 jobs that are dependent on this work, or the fact that we are investing in new technology and new capabilities, bringing prosperity across the country.

Mr Sweeney: The Secretary of State recognises the capital investment of over £300 million that is going into the shipyard in Barrow, which is fantastic for the town. If that is good enough for the Trident renewal programme, why was it not good enough for the Type 26 programme on the Clyde, which has not seen the equivalent level of capital investment in shipyard infrastructure?

Gavin Williamson: Simply, BAE Systems decided that that level of investment in the Govan shipyard was not required. But we are making a multi-year investment in Type 26s, providing an order book for the Govan shipyard into the 2030s. That is something that most shipyards would look at enviously.

The investments we have made and the decisions that we have taken on extra investment on Dreadnought mean that the new submarines will be delivered on time. To guarantee that delivery, we have modernised our entire nuclear enterprise. We have established the Defence Nuclear Organisation to manage our portfolio of nuclear programmes. We have created the Submarine Delivery Agency, which with our industry partners has made real progress on the ground in building our future submarines and ensuring that our current boats are able to fulfil their missions. We have established the new Dreadnought Alliance, which through a coalition of the MOD, BAE

Systems and Rolls-Royce combines the skills of the large players in industry with the talents of the public sector to deliver the best for defence and the best for the nation

Meanwhile, we are continuing to refine the options and technical solutions that will inform our decisions on replacing the warhead. Next year, over half a century on since HMS Resolution's historic voyage, Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde will become home to all our submarines. One of the largest employment sites in Scotland, the base provides for the livelihoods of around 6,800 military and civilians, and brings significant wider benefits to the local economy and the whole of Scotland. It is a salutary reminder, not just of the enormous role that Scotland, as the home of our deterrent, plays in protecting the UK and our NATO allies, but of its role in sustaining hundreds of businesses, as well as thousands of jobs, across the length and breadth of our Union.

The Barrow-in-Furness shipyard gives a sense of the sheer scale of the enterprise. The construction hall alone, where Dreadnought is being built, is the size of 21 Olympic swimming pools. The deterrent does not just provide jobs: it is helping to train thousands of apprentices in engineering, design, software development, naval architecture and combat systems. Many of those apprentices are following in the footsteps not just of their parents, but of their grandparents, and they are learning the sorts of advanced manufacturing techniques that will keep their descendants and Britain at the cutting edge of technology for years and generations to come.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Secretary of State is making an important point about the importance of skills. We learned the costs when we stopped submarine building in the 1990s and the knock-on effects that had on Astute. Can he emphasise to his officials the importance of those skills now, and the need to ensure a continuation of work after Dreadnought, so that we do not get the gap we had before?

John Woodcock: Get on with it!

Gavin Williamson: I hear what the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) says. We are building a lot more submarines in Barrow than the last Labour Government ever did, so I was hoping that he would shout, "Thank you."

I want to underline the important point made by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), because it is about investing in those skills continuously. Barrow has one of the healthiest order books that it has seen for a long time, and the sense is that that includes a whole generation not just of Astute but of the Dreadnought class submarines. That is why we are looking at how best to take advantage of how we conduct warfare sub-surface at the moment, making sure that we invest in the right type of technology to keep a competitive advantage over our opponents, and keeping the skills here in the United Kingdom.

Mr Kevan Jones: I agree with everything that the Secretary of State has just said. A lot of the work on the naval design of the early stages of Dreadnought is being carried out now, but it will come to an end quite quickly. It is important that we have follow-on work for those

[Mr Kevan Jones]

designers, otherwise we will get a gap and those people will be employed in other nuclear sector industries. When we come to the next generation of submarines, therefore, they will not be there.

Gavin Williamson: We saw that difficult problem occur after the sustained gap in Barrow when work was not undertaken on submarines over a period of almost 10 years, so we are very aware of that. We are currently doing a study on how we develop the next generation. If the investment in the Dreadnought programme were to come to an end, the skills that are being developed in Barrow—and in Derby with Rolls-Royce and in hundreds of businesses across the country—would be lost. We would lose that national capability. That is why we are doing what the right hon. Gentleman suggests, because those skills are almost impossible to replace. We recognise that the investment in the deterrent is an investment in our future in more ways than one.

Nineteen sixty-nine will always be remembered as an iconic year: it was the year an astronaut first set foot on the moon. From a UK perspective, however, an event far less heralded has proved to be far more enduring, for the unsung heroes who began their undersea vigil that year have guaranteed our peace and prosperity for decades. Our nuclear deterrence posture is only possible thanks to their commitment. Out of sight they may be, but they are never out of mind. We can never fully repay them for what they have given our nation, but in a more uncertain world we are ensuring that they will have the means to perform their outstanding and vital service to our nation, safeguarding our way of life relentlessly for another 50 years.

3.10 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Labour fully supports the UK's continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, and we are committed to the renewal of the nuclear submarines.

I pay tribute to all those whose hard work and dedication have supported the deterrent over its lifespan: workers on the new Dreadnought class at sites across the country, including those whom I visited in Barrow; and Royal Navy personnel past and present who have crewed the nuclear submarines over the past 50 years. Their commitment and skill are integral to the continuous nature of the deterrent. We are indebted to them for their service and to their families for their support.

The first duty of the Government is the protection of their citizens. The nuclear deterrent makes an important contribution to our country's security, alongside our brave armed forces and a range of conventional and non-conventional capabilities.

We recognise that we live in a world where the number of states that possess nuclear weapons has continued to grow and where others are actively seeking to acquire them. The threats facing the UK are real and undiminished, and there is a need to deter the use of nuclear weapons in all circumstances—none of us ever wants to be in a position where the deterrent is used. If we ever got to that situation, it would represent a catastrophic failure of our rules-based system and of the very concept of deterrence.

Deterrence encompasses a broad range of actions, from diplomatic means to conventional force and, ultimately, the nuclear deterrent. We must always ensure

that we have the very best conventional forces, including cyber-capabilities, and that the UK uses its influence on the world stage to ensure that we deal with conflicts and tensions early, without allowing them to escalate dangerously.

The nature of the threats we face is changing, be they the ravages of climate change, drought, starvation, gross inequality within and between countries—whether state or non-state actors—ever more complex technologies, hybrid warfare, or the sophisticated use of cyber-information warfare to attack our democratic institutions and our open public cyber-spaces. We are committed to working with fellow NATO countries to counteract such threats and to guarantee the collective security of our allies.

As a nuclear-armed power, the UK has important obligations under the non-proliferation treaty, which British Prime Minister Harold Wilson was instrumental in establishing. Next year marks the 50th anniversary of its entering into force, the only treaty that imposes a binding commitment on the nuclear-weapon states to pursue the goal of multilateral disarmament together. Labour is committed to the NPT and to working with international partners on a multilateral basis to create a nuclear-free world. In government, Labour worked to reduce the number of operationally available warheads to fewer than 160. The last Labour Government signed the international code of conduct against ballistic missile proliferation, as well as the international convention for the suppression of acts of nuclear terrorism.

The other objective of the non-proliferation treaty is of course to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology. Unfortunately, the number of states that possess such weapons has continued to grow, and other countries are working actively to acquire them. North Korea has continued in its pursuit of nuclear weapons, despite significant UN sanctions and attempts by the international community to seek dialogue with the regime. The Iran nuclear deal, which was so painstakingly negotiated to curtail that country's nuclear ambitions, is now under immense pressure due to President Trump's decision to withdraw US support for it. As a nuclear-weapon state and a member of the P5, we cannot simply stand by as the international norm against proliferation of such weapons is eroded. Instead, the UK should take a leading role in multilateral efforts to combat that trend.

We know that there have been issues with the affordability and timely delivery of our own programme. The Public Accounts Committee has said that one-year budget cycles can present problems for programmes such as Dreadnought, and it recommended using this year's spending review as an opportunity to explore longer-term budgeting arrangements for the nuclear programme. When the Minister winds up, will he set out the discussions he has had with Treasury on that? In addition to the Dreadnought programme, the Government are in the process of considering options to replace the warheads used in the Trident missiles. Will the Minister tell the House when he expects that work to be completed?

Finally, although I had not wanted to mention the B-word, the Government have acknowledged that elements of the supply chain for the nuclear enterprise are based in other European Union countries. However, almost three years since the referendum, the level of access that we will have to EU markets post Brexit is still unclear. In the light of that significant uncertainty, what assurances

will the Minister offer suppliers to ensure that there will be no impediments to parts crossing borders? I will be most grateful if he addresses those issues in his winding-up speech.

3.16 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am delighted to follow two such supportive speeches on the nuclear deterrent and the work of those who have crewed it for the past 50 years. It is amazing to think of the combination of high training and long periods of low activity that such personnel have to undergo. They truly are the silent guardians of the country and we are hugely in their debt.

What is more, most Members of this House recognise that fact. It is worth putting on the record that in recent years the House has had two key votes on the question of the renewal of the nuclear deterrent submarine fleet, the first under the Labour Government of Tony Blair on 14 March 2007. The House voted by 409 to 161—a massive majority of 248—to proceed with the initial gate of the replacement or successor submarine fleet. The second was under the Conservative Government of the current Prime Minister on 18 July 2016, when the House voted by a colossal majority of 355—namely, 472 votes to 117—to proceed to the main stages of development and production of the submarines.

The only issue to which I took a little exception in the contribution of the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), was in one turn of phrase, when she said how appalling it would be if the deterrence weapons were used. I remind her gently that the nuclear deterrent is in use every day of every week all around the year, because the purpose of the nuclear deterrent is to ensure that nuclear war does not break out because no one is in a position to attack us with impunity.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): In the right hon. Gentleman's description of the deterrent, will he explain why none of the missiles is actually targeted at any targets?

Dr Lewis: It is for the simple reason that, in the unlikely event of anyone being mad enough to attack us—because we have the ability to retaliate—it would be simple to target missiles to retaliate against them, and that could easily result in the obliteration of any country unwise enough to launch a nuclear attack against a nuclear power such as ourselves.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in applauding the speech from the shadow Defence Secretary, but does he share my disappointment that she did not take any interventions? She may have been able to explain the fundamental flaw in Labour's Front-Bench position, which is that we cannot have an effective deterrent if we have committed never to use it, as the shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition have done.

Dr Lewis: I accept the fact that Labour has a problem with certain key figures who have always been opposed in principle to the possession of a nuclear deterrent. However, today is not the day to have that debate. I know that the shadow Defence Secretary and every one

of the Labour Back Benchers whom I see opposite are wholly committed to keeping this country safe and strong. If anyone can ensure that the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor are not allowed to undermine the sensible policy outlined from the Opposition Front Bench today, it is that cohort of people. I wish them the best of luck in that endeavour.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman described a situation in which we would be able to retaliate if we were attacked. I do not know about him, but if I had been obliterated by a nuclear weapon, I would not care a jot whether we obliterated somebody back.

Dr Lewis: I am sorry to have to explain to the hon. Lady that the whole point of our ability to retaliate is to ensure that we are not attacked in the first place. One really does not have to have had more than half a century of experience to realise that that is bound to be the case. I was not going to quote Professor Sir Henry Tizard, whom I have quoted in debates many times before, but it looks like it is necessary for me to do so.

Professor Tizard was the leading defence scientist in the second world war at the time when atomic weapons were being created. In 1945, with a committee of leading scientists, including Nobel prize winners, he was supposed to look forward to see what the future nature of warfare might be. His committee was not allowed to explore the atomic bomb project in detail, but he insisted on putting in this primary rationale for nuclear deterrence, which holds as firmly today as it did in June 1945. He explained that the only answer that those senior defence scientists, with all their experience of the second world war, could see to the advent of the atomic bomb was the preparedness to use it in retaliation, thus preventing an attack in the first place. I am sorry to inflict this on the House again, but he said:

“A knowledge that we were prepared, in the last resort, to do this”—

to retaliate—

“might well deter an aggressive nation. Duelling was a recognised method of settling quarrels between men of high social standing so long as the duellists stood twenty paces apart and fired at each other with pistols of a primitive type. If the rule had been that they should stand a yard apart with pistols at each other's hearts, we doubt whether it would long have remained a recognised method of settling affairs of honour.”

In other words, if someone knows that they are going to die, for a certainty, if they launch an attack against somebody else, they are not going to launch that attack in the first place.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State for actually taking interventions. Anyone who knows the history of the continuous nuclear deterrent knows that it is heavily reliant upon a relationship with the United States. With the present occupant of the White House being such a transactional individual, and with the United Kingdom about to enter into trade negotiations with the US, how confident is the right hon. Gentleman that his Government's negotiators will not, say, trade chlorinated chicken and access to the NHS—[*Interruption.*] I am talking technically. How confident is he that that would be not be traded for the United States role in the nuclear deterrent? Although he knows that I fully oppose it, of course.

Dr Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is an admirable member of the Defence Committee, and we greatly value his contributions, but I do not think that that was his most stellar contribution—[*Laughter.*] Sometimes people say, “Well, what if the Americans wanted to have some sort of veto or to stop us using the nuclear deterrent?”—I mean using it in the sense of firing it rather than of using it in the sense that it is used all day long every day of the year to prevent nuclear conflict. The first point is that this nuclear system is totally under our own control. It would gradually wither on the vine over a long period of time only if the United States decided for some reason that it no longer wanted there to be a second centre of nuclear decision making within the NATO alliance. At any time now, as it has been for the last 50 years, it is entirely independently controlled by us.

The second point is about why an American president would ever not want there to be a second centre of nuclear decision making in NATO, because that reduces any temptation of an aggressor against NATO to think that it could pick off this country without America responding.

Richard Benyon: Looking forward, does my right hon. Friend agree that renewing the fleet with the new Dreadnought class is the most important decision? In doing so, we have decided that we cannot predict what is going to happen in 20, 30 or 40 years. Those who want us to get rid of the deterrent and not renew our fleet are taking a terrible gamble in a dangerous world, because we cannot foresee the enemies that we may face in the decades ahead.

Dr Lewis: I pay tribute to the people who work at Aldermaston in my right hon. Friend’s constituency for all that they contribute to the maintenance of our nuclear deterrent capability. Not only do I agree with him, but he has led me nicely back to the central theme of my narrative, which was to try to set out for the House the five main military arguments in favour of retaining our independent deterrent, the first of which is precisely the point that he has just made. Future military threats and conflicts will be no more predictable than those that engulfed us throughout the 20th century. That is the overriding justification for preserving armed forces in peacetime as a national insurance policy. No one knows what enemies might confront us during the next 30 to 50 years, but it is highly probable that at least some of them will be armed with mass-destruction weapons.

The second argument is that it is not the weapons themselves that we have to fear but the nature of the regimes that possess them. Whereas democracies are generally reluctant to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear dictatorships—although they did use them against Japan in 1945—the reverse is not true. Think, for example, what the situation would have been in 1982 if a non-nuclear Britain had faced an Argentina in possession of even a few tactical nuclear bombs and the means of delivering them. There would have been no question of our being able to retake the Falkland Islands in that conflict.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): This is such an important point. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when we speak about freedom, our independent at-sea deterrent has been one of the most important factors in securing freedom and democracy around the world?

Dr Lewis: Absolutely. If we get into a situation where the United States and the NATO alliance are paralysed in the face of dictatorships armed even with a few mass-destruction weapons that cannot be neutralised by the threat of retaliation, there would be no prospect of our mounting a defence of any country under attack, anywhere in the world, no matter how deserving it might be of our military intervention.

The third argument is that the United Kingdom has traditionally played a more important and decisive role in preserving freedom than other medium-sized states have been able or willing to play. Democratic countries without nuclear weapons have little choice but to declare themselves neutral and hope for the best or, alternatively, to rely upon the nuclear umbrella of powerful allies. The United Kingdom is already a nuclear power and is also much harder to defeat by conventional means because of our physical separation from the continent.

The fourth argument is that our prominence as the principal ally of the United States, our strategic geographical position and the fact that we are obviously the junior partner might tempt an aggressor to think of attacking us separately. Given the difficulty of overrunning the United Kingdom with conventional forces, by contrast to our more vulnerable allies on the continent, an aggressor could be tempted to use one or more mass-destruction weapons against us on the assumption that the United States might not reply on our behalf. Even if that assumption were false, the attacker would find out his mistake when, and only when, it was too late for all concerned. An independently controlled British nuclear deterrent massively reduces the prospect of such a fatal miscalculation.

The final military argument is that no quantity of conventional forces can compensate for the military disadvantage that faces a non-nuclear country in a war against a nuclear-armed enemy. The atomic bombing of Japan is especially instructive not only because the Emperor was forced to surrender but because of the reverse scenario. Imagine if Japan had developed atomic bombs in the summer of 1945 and the allies had not. An invasion to end the war would then have been completely impossible.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Quite a few colleagues in the House have served in the British Army of the Rhine—I served there three times. When we, as conventional forces, practised deploying against an enemy, we were much sustained by the knowledge that there was a nuclear back-up in our armoury. That raised our morale. We thought that people would not dare attack us when we had a nuclear device in our hand. It would be mad to get rid of it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. To help Members, I will be aiming for 10 minutes each from Back Benchers.

Dr Lewis: I will endeavour to finish quickly, Mr Deputy Speaker.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) was right to think in those terms when he wore that uniform. What is more, hon. Members on both sides of the House, in very large numbers, think in similar terms.

To bring my remarks speedily to a conclusion, I will draw out five lessons that have impressed themselves on me in such debates over the past 35 years, since we replaced the first-generation Polaris submarine fleet with the second-generation Vanguard submarine fleet.

The first lesson is that the concepts of unilateralism and multilateralism are mutually incompatible. One requires the unconditional abandonment of our nuclear weapons and nuclear alliances, whereas the other would consider nuclear renunciation only if our potential enemies carry it out at the same time.

The second lesson is that a nuclear-free world is not necessarily a more peaceful world. Abolition of the nuclear balance of terror would be a curse and not a blessing if it made the world once again safe for all-out conventional conflict between the superpowers. In military terms, Russia remains a superpower, regardless of complacent western analyses of the weakness of her economy.

The third lesson is the fundamental divide—which we see in today's debate—between those people in western societies who believe that wars result mainly from groundless mutual fear and suspicion, and those who believe that only the prospect of retaliation in kind prevents adventurist states from acting aggressively.

The fourth lesson is the validity of the hackneyed but nevertheless accurate concept of the silent majority. Although individual polling questions can be devised to produce apparent majorities against deploying particular nuclear systems, whenever the fundamental issue of deterrence has been posed the result is always decisive. Two thirds of the British people want us to continue to possess nuclear weapons as long as other countries have them, and only one quarter want us to give them up unconditionally.

The final lesson is that since fewer than 10% of our people have been undecided in poll after poll on this fundamental issue, it does not make political sense to try to appease either that small group or the much larger number of highly committed unilateralists such as my friends in the Scottish National party. The strategic task for the Government, and for the Opposition, is to reinforce the views of the two thirds who believe in what may be termed peace through strength and deterrence, rather than peace through disarmament, so the issue will be in the forefront of people's minds, as it was in the general elections of 1983 and 1987, when this was a very prominent topic in the election debate.

None of this would be possible but for the dedication and, indeed, heroism of those people who, month after month, patrol the seas and are not seen and not heard—they are meant to be not seen and not heard—in order silently to spread over us an umbrella of nuclear protection. Long may they continue to do so.

3.37 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, despite agreeing with almost none of what he had to say. He is always unfailingly courteous to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on that Committee, and it is always a pleasure to hear what he has to say.

I will start, as the Secretary of State did, by sending our best wishes to those based at Barrow, given this afternoon's bomb scare. Despite our disagreement, which I am sure we will get into, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) should be under no illusion that folk there have the best wishes of the Scottish National party. The same is true of all those who serve in the armed forces, including on the frontline and in the Royal Navy. The Secretary of State mentioned the submariners, and I will mention one former submariner by name. Feargal Dalton is, of course, the husband of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and an Irishman who now serves as a Scottish National party councillor in Glasgow. We send our best wishes to all those who serve, including civilian staff and the Ministry of Defence police.

Our disagreement and quarrel is not with them, but with the political decisions taken in this Chamber. Only in this House of Commons, at this time, against the backdrop of a major constitutional crisis, where each day is worse than the last, could it be thought of as a good use of our time to backslap each other on the UK being 50 years as a marine nuclear power. Anyone who thinks that is a good use of our time right now is, frankly, off their head. But it should come as no surprise, as the Prime Minister is out in Brussels with the begging bowl right now, that those on the Benches that represent this crumbling relic of a Government—there is no doubt more to come from the Labour Benches as well—want to hark back to the symbols of power, stature and glory as they diminish Britain's standing in the world. Indeed, Max Hastings, the military historian, put it best in *The Times* last year when he said that Trident renewal was a “big willy gesture” of a small willy nation. I could not have put it better had I tried. The Scottish National party's opposition to the nuclear project is well known and well documented, but given the opportunity this afternoon—

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will give way in time.

Given the opportunity that we have to discuss the matter this afternoon, we will take the unusual step of dividing the House this evening to show our opposition to the Trident renewal programme.

I intend to set out three clear arguments as succinctly as possible for why there is no military case for the continuous at-sea deterrent—there is certainly no economic case for it—and indeed how we can come to the conclusion, given last week's National Audit Office report on the failure of this Government and former Labour Governments properly to decommission nuclear submarines, that the United Kingdom is now an irresponsible nuclear power.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab) *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I give way to the president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Mrs Moon: I just want to say on behalf of the NATO nuclear alliance that that alliance greatly values the UK deterrent and would actually be grateful for common sense, trust and belief in the UK's deterrent and our capacity and willingness to dedicate ourselves to its stability and security. The alliance would actually be horrified by the hon. Gentleman's earlier comments.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I should just point out to the hon. Lady, for whom I have bucketloads of respect as she does a fine job in her position, that most members of NATO are not nuclear-armed countries.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman in time.

In opposing the renewal programme this afternoon, we intend to give voice to the millions outside this Chamber who do not back the iron-clad consensus that exists between the Conservative and Labour parties on wasting billions of pounds on nuclear weapons.

On the fact that there is no military case, I want to turn to the recent modernising defence programme, which represents a missed opportunity to do things a bit differently. I had hopes that the much vaunted reforming zeal of the Secretary of State when he first came to office would actually be shown to be true, but those hopes were sadly misplaced on my part. Indeed, the MDP, which represented an opportunity to do things differently, has, rather perversely, actually contributed to the miasma of despair and chaos that hangs over the Department over which he now presides. The armed forces remain as small as they were when Napoleon was on his horse. The Government are woefully off target—the target that was set in their own manifesto for the size of the armed forces. Furthermore, the promises that were made to the people of Scotland in 2014 on the size of the armed forces are going one way, and it is not north. Staggeringly, this Government continue to employ Capita—

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman in time. He does not need to keep shouting at me. I know he is there—I will give way to him, as I always do, and he knows that.

Staggeringly, despite the recruitment problems, this Government continue to spend millions of pounds on Capita and its deeply flawed recruitment programme.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: If a motion came to the House today to sack Capita, I would be in the Lobby with the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who I know has a track record of opposing Capita.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will give way to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), then I will come back to the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford.

Mr Jones: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He says that he will divide the House today to vote against this motion. I understand that it is the SNP's policy to be a member of NATO. He is right when he says that there are many nations that do not possess nuclear weapons, but as a member of NATO, a country has to agree to the nuclear doctrine and the nuclear strategy and sit on the nuclear planning group. Is he saying that if an independent Scotland joined NATO it would

sometimes want to abrogate its duties, or is he advocating to vote against nuclear weapons today, but actually join a nuclear alliance?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The right hon. Gentleman does not need to explain Scottish National party policy to me. Perhaps if he listens, I can educate him. Scottish National party policy is for an independent Scotland to join NATO—everyone, including him, knows that that would be accepted, by the way—but on the contingency that Trident will be removed from Scotland's waters. That does not prevent the United Kingdom from continuing to have a nuclear at-sea deterrent, although we think it should not and almost certainly would not.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Hon. Members are coming at me from all sides.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, no—the right hon. Gentleman asked me a question and I have not finished explaining myself to him. Even if the UK gave up its nuclear weapons tonight, there would still be other nuclear states in the NATO alliance.

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, I am not going to get into this with the right hon. Gentleman.

We are very clear in our belief that the United Kingdom should give up its nuclear weapons, because there is no economic or military case for them, and this country now behaves like an irresponsible nuclear power.

Mr Francois: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On Capita, I will take the right hon. Gentleman's intervention.

Mr Francois: Well, the hon. Gentleman might get a buy one, get one free. On the matter of Capita, let me just say that, although I do not normally agree with the SNP, I would definitely vote with the hon. Gentleman to sack Capita tomorrow; it is a disgrace and it is now so awful that it is a threat to the defence of the realm. However, when it comes to our nuclear deterrent, the hon. Gentleman and I could not be more opposed, and I will always want to support the maintenance of nuclear defences in this country.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Well, I am glad that normal service has been resumed.

As well as the issue of recruitment, there is of course the other issue of retention, which is becoming a big problem in the armed forces. I know that the Secretary of State recognises that. Indeed, we now have a situation whereby members of the armed forces are staying in the armed forces until such a time as they get a decent skill and qualification, with the sole intention of leaving to go into private industry. That is what the last armed forces survey tells us—I do not know why some Members on the Tory Benches are shaking their heads.

As this Government press on with Trident renewal, we should cast our eyes back to a couple of promises on defence that they made to the people of Scotland in the 2014 referendum campaign. Of course, the promise was made of a frigate factory on the Clyde. That promise was broken—not by this Secretary of State, but by the speaker who I am sure is going to follow me, the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon). Yet he seemed to think that there was a frigate factory on the Clyde. In fact, he seems to be maintaining that there is. I recall him standing at the Dispatch Box declaring that there was a frigate factory on the Clyde, but no such thing exists.

Then we come to the order of frigates. The former Prime Minister, David Cameron, promised that 13 frigates were to be built on the Clyde; that number was then cut down to eight. Any time we get a promise on defence or shipbuilding from this Tory Government—a bit like the way in which the fleet solid support ship contract has been lined up at the minute—we can be guaranteed that it will be another sell-out from Westminster.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend recall that, when the former Secretary of State was at the Dispatch Box claiming that there was a frigate factory, BBC Scotland was with a GMB official at the piece of land where the frigate factory was supposed to be, which was of course a landfill of ash?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I do indeed recall that. My hon. Friend does a fine job in representing the shipbuilding workforce in his constituency.

Mr Sweeney: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, I will not. I am going to move on to the issue of the threat. The shadow Secretary of State was right to say that the threat is ever evolving and complex.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend has just mentioned the shadow Secretary of State, and it was unfortunate that she refused to take any interventions. In her opening remarks, she said that Labour supports the continuous at-sea deterrent. Does that not prove what we all know—that it does not matter what the Scottish branch office does, with pretend motions about being against Trident replacement, but that it is about what the head office down here says and the branch office has to do what it is told?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am going to come to the Opposition, don't worry about that. I say to people who may disagree with the SNP's policy on nuclear weapons that at least they know what they are getting—opposition. What we get from Labour is a mess. Whether it is a Front Bencher, a Back Bencher, a Scottish MP, a non-Scottish MP or a Member of the Scottish Parliament, we get a mess from Labour with regard to nuclear weapons.

The new strategic defence and security review that is surely being worked on right now must reflect the threats that we do indeed face. The hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) was right to say that they come from a diverse range of state and non-state actors. She mentioned in her short speech the issue of hybrid

security, which the Government do not understand as well as they could. They could learn quite a few lessons from our allies, particularly in the Baltic states. We also have the issue of the Government of Russia, in particular, continually testing the response times of the Royal Navy and the RAF. There are now regular incursions into Scottish waters and Scottish airspace. In that regard, we commend the RAF, particularly those based at Lossiemouth, for the work that it does in keeping us safe. Both the Defence Committee and NATO itself have urged the Government not to forget their own backyard in the high north and the north Atlantic. Indeed, when I sat in the Secretary of State's office in Main Building before the modernising defence programme, that was central to what we asked for the programme to focus on. I give credit where it is due—a new focus has been given to the high north and the north Atlantic, and SNP Members, at least, welcome that.

It is time for the UK Government to ditch the jingoism of global Britain. Indeed, the Centre for Eastern Studies, a think-tank based in Poland, stated in a recent report on Brexit and its impact on the UK's security posture that this desire to be seen as a big global player could undermine its efforts to help to protect the eastern NATO flank. I recall how the extraordinary speech that the Secretary of State made in February this year telling us how he was going to send personnel off to the South China sea saw China cancel a visit by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is time for the Government to focus on the bread-and-butter issues here at home that I have highlighted.

John Woodcock: I have helpfully given the hon. Gentleman, inadvertently, advance notice on the issue of NATO, so let me take him back to that. He talks about the high north. He knows that that is where much of the nuclear patrol activity by Russia is happening. If the SNP's case is that it is morally repugnant to have nuclear weapons, how is it morally defensible for Scotland to maintain itself under the nuclear umbrella if the submarines are just sent a few hundred miles to the south? Surely it would be logical for the SNP to say that it would withdraw from NATO's nuclear alliance.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, it would not. Indeed, the two arguments I am setting out, the second of which I am coming on to, are that there is no military or economic case for this. The hon. Gentleman knows, because I have said this to him before, that I am not going to get into an argument about morality with him because you never wrestle with chimney sweeps.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Can the debate come through the Chair? I do not want it to get personalised.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am now going to come on to the economic case. It ought to be the case, for sure—and on this I am sure we do agree with others—that the Government carry out a threat analysis and, subsequent to that, get what they need to meet that threat and to keep people safe. But we do not believe, quite simply, that Trident complements that effort. The total cost of Trident, from design to through-life support, ran into many, many billions of pounds—estimated by some to be as high as £200 billion. We know for sure that the current renewal project is already woefully out

[Stewart Malcolm McDonald]

of control. Indeed, over £1 billion of the £10 billion contingency that was set aside by the Ministry of Defence has already been tapped into, and of the extra £1 billion announced by the Chancellor, £400 million is exclusively for the nuclear renewal project. The most recent House of Commons Library figures tell us that the £2.2 billion per year spent on maintaining the deterrent is roughly equivalent to £42 million each week. That is about the same as we spend on income support, statutory maternity pay, carer's allowance or winter fuel payments.

All that represents a drain on conventional defence, which has always been the priority of the SNP. This is at a time when the Department has enormous funding gaps in its equipment plan, estimated by the National Audit Office to be well over £10 billion, and big gaps in the funding of the defence estate, which is draining money as though it were going out of fashion. It is at a time when the Ministry of Defence continues with the bizarre fetish of privatising and outsourcing things that do not need to be privatised or outsourced: the defence fire and rescue service, the war pension scheme, the armed forces compensation scheme and even the medals office. Those things must remain in the hands of the MOD in their entirety. In the armed forces, it is not uncommon for serving members to have to buy substitute kit because the money is not there to get it through the Department's budget.

Far from enhancing our national security and providing the necessary capability to keep us safe, Trident is a drain on conventional defence, particularly as the Government keep it as part of the overall defence budget, to the point that it diminishes our conventional defence and security posture, which is in need of proper investment and oversight.

To make one last point, it can be concluded that this country is now an irresponsible nuclear power. The timing of this debate could not be more breathtaking if the Government had tried. We sit here today to mark 50 years as a maritime nuclear power, but just last week the National Audit Office told us that hundreds of millions of pounds are being wasted by the Government on storing obsolete nuclear submarines and their utter failure to decommission them properly and responsibly. The independent NAO—this is not me—has said that it puts the UK's reputation as a responsible nuclear power at risk.

The MOD has not decommissioned a single submarine successfully since 1980, twice as many are currently in storage as are in service, nine still contain radioactive fuel, seven have been in storage for longer than they were in service and no submarines have been defuelled in the last 15 years. It is a total failure, and the liability costs estimated by the Secretary of State's own Department run to £7.5 billion. We can be sure, as night follows day, that that figure will get higher. The auditors said that the MOD did not have a fully developed plan to dispose of operational Vanguard and Astute submarines or its future Dreadnought-class vessels, which have different nuclear reactors.

Here the House sits with the iron-clad consensus that we must renew a nuclear submarine programme that the Government do not even have plans to decommission in the future, even though the National Audit Office has just outlined what a costly farce that has become. This

cannot just be shrugged off as though it is business as usual. The public expect us to get to the bottom of it. I ask the Secretary of State—perhaps the Minister will say when he sums up—whether he will set up a public inquiry into the farce of nuclear submarine decommissioning.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will know that his colleague the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and I are working with the Department to make progress on this matter. Will he and the SNP support us because, despite their position, we need to find the line of credit for nuclear decommissioning, which is an enormous one across the board? Rather than bashing the Government on a question that is long and historic, will they help us to move forward and get the Treasury to support that decommissioning line?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am sure the hon. Lady wants to catch my eye to speak. I do not want her to use up her speech just yet. I am bothered that, with 19 speakers, there will now be less than 10 minutes each.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The short answer to the hon. Lady's question is yes. I will conclude, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I am conscious of the time.

There is nothing to celebrate here in 50 years as a maritime nuclear power. No doubt the rest of the debate will be wrapped up in British jingoism. I am not sure anything could convince the Conservatives to abandon the nuclear programme, but I am at a loss as to why the Leader of the Opposition allows his party to be locked into it. There were times when he would have spoken in this debate. He would have been on these Benches and, if there had been a Division, he would have been in the voting Lobby with us at the end of the debate. He would have found himself with Members of the Scottish National party. That he has abandoned that honourable principle and not even tried to move his party's position on nuclear weapons remains a disappointment to millions and a mystery to me.

It is left to the Scottish National party to give voice to those who oppose the militarily and economically illiterate case that the Government have put forward, supported by Leader of the Opposition's Front-Bench team. It is left to the Scottish National party to urge the Government to sign up to the nuclear ban treaty. It is left to us to make the case for sound conventional defence that protects us at home and ensures that we can do the job that needs to be done with our allies abroad. And it is left to us to say, with one voice in this House, let us please stop this madness.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): To help everybody to get in, can we use up to 10 minutes and no more?

4.1 pm

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): The only thing on which I agreed with the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) was the tribute he took the trouble to pay at the beginning of his speech to

the crews of the *Polaris* and *Vanguard* submarines. They have been the backbone of Operation Relentless, and the success of that operation is entirely dependent on the commitment of those who have conducted those patrols—in each case, an extraordinary service of perhaps three months or more.

There is no other service in the Navy quite like it, with submariners cut off from the outside world unlike in any part of the Royal Navy, unable to visit foreign ports or carry out different missions. They are isolated from their family and friends at all times in that three-month period. They are the stoics of the sea and we do owe them our gratitude. We should salute them all, past and present, and look again at how that service can be better recognised, but we should also tell them loudly from this House: thank you for helping keep us safe. They did keep us safe.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said, it is extraordinary that some still argue that the nuclear deterrent is never used. It is used every minute of every hour of every day to ensure uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor towards this country. While we have nuclear weapons, they can never be sure what our response is likely to be. He reminded us that that was endorsed by a majority of 355 as recently as three years ago when we authorised the replacement of the *Vanguard* boats by the new *Dreadnought* submarines.

The Prime Minister and I set out the arguments for that renewal three years ago. I will not repeat them, but I want to make three further points. The threats we identified then, back in July 2016, have increased. First, Russia not only has intensified its rhetoric but is modernising its nuclear forces. It now has the ability to station nuclear missiles in its exclave at Kaliningrad, or indeed in the territory it now controls in Crimea. Secondly, since that debate, North Korea has carried out nuclear tests and is developing systems whereby nuclear warheads can be launched from both space and submarines. We should never forget that London is as close to North Korea as is Los Angeles. Thirdly, nuclear material is now coming within reach of terrorist groups that wish us and others harm. Our response must be relentless and resolute.

John Spellar: The right hon. Gentleman rightly drew attention to the overwhelming majority in this House in 2016. Does he now regret that his Government delayed so long in actually putting that decision to the House?

Sir Michael Fallon: Certainly in my period of office, I wanted that decision brought to the House as soon as possible. We were of course, as the right hon. Gentleman will recall, in a coalition Government, and we spent a lot of time trying to accommodate the wishes of our coalition partners. As he has already observed, that party has not even bothered to turn up to this debate.

It is of course important, each time we make these renewal decisions, that we emphasise our continuing commitment to the international work of non-proliferation. There is a particular responsibility on those countries that retain nuclear weapons to continue to commit to that treaty and to reduce the weapons they hold. That is why I reduced the number of warheads on each submarine from 48 to 40. The stockpile is reducing, and this country now holds only half the number of nuclear

weapons it held 40 years ago. However, we also have to look ahead. It takes 13 to 14 years to put a new nuclear missile submarine into the water. If hon. Members believe, as I do, that there may still be a nuclear threat to this country in the 2030s, the 2040s and the 2050s all the way up to 2060, then it would of course be irresponsible not to renew the delivery mechanism—first the boats and then in time, perhaps later in this Parliament, the missile system itself.

Let me end with three final points. First, on the budget, of course it is true that the £31 billion, and the contingency alongside it, is spread over a very long period of construction, but, equally, it remains a very lumpy and sizeable part of the Department's budget, and we do not get the advantages of scale—we replace only four boats each time—that the Americans are able to profit from when they are replacing many more submarines. There may be points in the work of the Public Accounts Committee and of others in this House that require us to look again at how the submarine renewal programme is actually financed year to year and to see whether there are economies of scale in forward buying some of the parts for all four submarines right at the beginning.

Secondly, as the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) said in challenging the hon. Member for Glasgow South, the NATO alliance is a nuclear alliance. If, sadly, Scotland ever became independent, he would be applying to join a nuclear alliance. In the arguments he put before the House, he seemed to have forgotten that many members of NATO signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty in the full knowledge that they would be protected by NATO's nuclear umbrella. That is why they signed the treaty, as the hon. Lady pointed out. That means we need to keep reminding our allies in NATO of the importance of the nuclear planning group and of their commitment to maintaining their dual-use aircraft, and we need to remind their politicians and their publics that NATO is a nuclear alliance.

Thirdly, the point about independence, which was raised by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), is worth addressing. Of course it is true, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East said, that the system gives us—the UK, the United States and France—separate sources of decision making, making it even more difficult for potential aggressors to be sure of a single response. However, it is also important that this nuclear deterrent of ours is independent, because we cannot be sure of threats that may emanate simply against our shores and nobody else's. That is why it is important that we keep our deterrent independent and that we satisfy ourselves that it is independent. Indeed, David Cameron and I separately took steps to reassure ourselves that the nuclear deterrent was independent. These are not details I can go into in public session, but it is important that the deterrent remains independent.

Let me conclude by saying yes, this deterrent was born of the cold war, but it is by no means a relic of the cold war. It is a key part of the defence of our country, and a key part of the defence of our freedoms and those of our allies. I am very sure that we need it now more than ever. I am equally sure that our successors in this place will, in 50 years' time, be commending the successors of those crews who have helped to perform this arduous but essential duty.

4.10 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): While listening to some of the fantastic speeches we have had so far I have been able to cross out whole swathes of my speech, because I do not intend to repeat what others have said. I would, however, just like to reiterate that we are here to celebrate 50 years of Britain's continuous at-sea deterrent, which has maintained peace and security for those 50 years. Many will talk of the NATO alliance being a nuclear alliance. I can say that not one member of NATO has ever stood up in the parliamentary assembly and said, "Let's get rid of it. We don't need the alliance. We don't need the British deterrent." Quite the opposite.

The one thing I dedicated myself to doing during my presidency is to remind people what NATO is, what its role has been in keeping peace for the past 70 years, and why it is critical to the defence and security of the United Kingdom and the rest of the alliance. Sadly, we have forgotten to do that. I was in Croatia the week before last. Every year, it celebrates its membership of NATO. The Croatian people know what it means in terms of building a democracy and providing security. We need to do that more in this country. That is why I am so pleased that we have this debate today.

I do not want to go over the past. That has been ably done by those who have gone before me. I want to look at what the current threats are and why the CASD remains absolutely critical to the defence and security of the alliance and every member state within it. Today, as has been said, the tempo and the threat is changing. It is rising again. States are building and expanding their nuclear missile systems, threatening across the alliance. I therefore want to stress the importance of a hidden deterrent—not an airborne or land-based deterrent, mobile though they are. The absolute uniqueness of the at-sea deterrent is its capacity to hide: the lack of certainty about where it is and when it will be brought into commission.

I accept that the sea domain has been neglected. I think everyone in this House who knows anything about defence will know that certainly across the alliance but especially in the UK because we are a maritime nation, we have failed to maintain our capacity as a military capability. We have also not built the number of submarines that we need, so that NATO's surface and sub-surface fleet is diminished. The SDSR has, however, stressed that we are in a position where revisionist states are building new threats and new tensions. It is on them that I want to focus today.

Revisionist states seek to use military power and threat to change and challenge the status quo to acquire more power by seizing territory, as we have seen in Ukraine and Georgia, and imposing a new form—their form—of government, not democracy, or by unilaterally and fundamentally rewriting the rules of the game. The best description I have had of what is happening in Russia in particular was by Norway's defence attaché to the UK, Colonel Olsen, who said:

"Russia is introducing new classes of conventional and nuclear attack submarines and is modernising its Northern Fleet through the addition of long-range, high-precision missiles. The totality of its modernisation programme adds up to a step-change strengthening of Russian maritime capability in support of an anti-access strategy that could challenge NATO's command of the high seas"—

with potentially both Europe and North America being placed "at existential risk". This is a strategy that we have not seen since the cold war.

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. Friend, as I will call her, for allowing me to intervene. Russia now practises using nuclear weapons on its exercises, so we ought to listen and watch what it says it will do, because my goodness, it will do that if it is pushed. That is why we need the nuclear deterrent.

Mrs Moon: I could not disagree with anything that the hon. Gentleman says. Those of us who are on the Defence Committee are very aware of that threat.

Russia has revamped and reoccupied seven former USSR bases in the Arctic. This is important to its ability to project power down through the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. Access into the north Atlantic and the ability to disrupt or control the sea lines of communications between North America and Europe would have a huge impact on the global economy, as well as preventing reinforcements from reaching Europe in the event of hostilities or crisis.

Russia has new capabilities, such as the Kilo SSKs, which are armed with dual-capability Kalibr missiles, which are very fast. The Yasen—SSBN—and Kalina-class subs are extremely long endurance. Russia has about 40 combat subs, the balance of which are in the northern fleet. Added to those impressive new subs are modern patrol boats, frigates and destroyers, all joined by a new ability to deploy submarines by stealth, explore underwater cables and exercise electronic warfare jamming.

Russia has also done something else: it has withdrawn from the 1987 intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty. The US and NATO argue that Russia has violated the INF treaty by testing and deploying a prohibited intermediate-range cruise missile. Russian officials deny that the missile in question—the 9M729—can fly that far. We tend to forget that the INF treaty banned all US and Soviet ground-launched missiles of intermediate range—that is, between 500 and 5,500 kilometres—and it resulted in the destruction of some 2,700 missiles up to 1991. There is a simple way of resolving this conflict: the special verification commission, established as part of the INF treaty, could be used to work out procedures for Russia to show that its missile does not fly that far. Russia has refused to do so. However, this is not just about new missiles and whether a treaty has been broken. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has made it clear that these missiles are hard to detect, mobile and nuclear capable, and they can reach European cities. They are a direct threat to NATO.

Equally, China is not a signatory to the INF treaty. It has deployed intermediate-range missiles on its territory. It has also begun to turn its attention away from land forces and towards the sea. Since 2013, there has been a marked acceleration in China's investment in naval resources. In 2017, it overtook the US as having the world's largest navy, whose reach goes beyond traditional strategic interests in the South China sea. That navy includes an impressive number of submarines—about 60, according to the United States Congressional Research Service. Not all of them carry nuclear warheads, but China is reported to be seeking to diversify the structure of its nuclear forces and to have a credible deterrence.

Alongside its fleet, China has opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti, and continues to develop interests in bases across the Indian Ocean. It also has an ambitious strategy of investment in commercial ports around the world. The Hudson Institute estimates that 10% of all equity in ports in Europe—including ports in Ukraine, Georgia and Greece—is now owned by Chinese companies. Much of the strategy is economic, but it brings with it defence threats.

For 50 years, this deterrent has kept us safe. We owe a huge debt of thanks, not just for the past but for the future, to those men and women in the silent service—in our industrial base—who continue to provide peace, security and stability, and who have prevented nuclear war for all those 50 years.

4.20 pm

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who painted a very clear and well-informed picture of the threat that we face. It is also a pleasure to speak in the debate.

I last spoke about this subject during a debate on alternatives to Trident under the coalition Government. It was a most unusual debate, in that it began with the then Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary to the Treasury putting forward one position, which would put CASD at risk, and ended with me, in closing the debate, putting forward another that would sustain it for the foreseeable future. I recall colleagues—perhaps in all parts of the House—being somewhat bemused at the novel idea of Ministers pulling in opposite directions. I had firmly wished that those days were behind us. However, in a sense that highlights the main point that I wish to make today: regardless of the turbulent politics of the time or the party of government of the day, the continuous at-sea deterrent has been there, day in, day out and night after night, the ultimate guarantor of our nation's security against existential blackmail or threat.

Let me begin by adding my personal tribute to the Royal Navy personnel who have made Operation Relentless the longest sustained military operation in this nation's history. With each boat having two captains and two crews, allowing continuous deployment, there are a large number of personnel on whom we rely and who perform to the highest standard in the challenging conditions that other Members have already described. We should also be grateful for the support of their families; long operations can take a particular toll on loved ones. There are pinch points of skills, which means that attracting and retaining skilled submariners is vital, but difficult, for the maintenance of the deterrence. I support the Royal Navy's efforts to allow increased flexibility in service to take account of modern family life in such difficult circumstances.

Of course, the deterrent has an impact on employment not only through boat crews but in the wider community. I hope that the House will excuse this shameless plug, but colleagues who read the Dunne review last year will be aware of the contribution of defence to our economy around the UK, and the submarine programme is a vital part of that. About 6,800 military and civilian personnel are currently employed at Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, that number is scheduled to increase to more than 8,500, and Clyde will then become the

largest employment site in Scotland. Those vital skilled jobs would be lost should the Scottish National party's policy of scrapping the nuclear deterrent ever come to pass. Thousands more are employed in keeping the deterrent both current and afloat, working for companies in the industrial supply chain in constituencies all over the country—in addition to the particular concentration in the constituency of the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who is in the Chamber to hear me point out that he is a long-standing champion of this whole endeavour. Now more than ever, it is vital that we make the case for our continuous at-sea deterrent.

Looking back over the 50 years of Operation Relentless, it is clear that in its infancy the need for the deterrent was fresh in the public consciousness, following the horrors of the second world war. In the years that followed, the immediate concern of Soviet proliferation and posturing outlined the very real potential existential threat to the west—perhaps no more so than during the Cuban missile crisis, which brought the world so close to the brink of devastating nuclear war. But since the fall of the Berlin wall 30 years ago and the collapse of the Soviet Union, current generations have faced a less obvious threat. For some, that has led to an undercurrent of public perception—so readily fed by social media misinformation—that there is less threat and that the need for a nuclear deterrent is behind us. But that, as we have heard so well from the hon. Member for Bridgend, is fundamentally to turn blind eyes—to underestimate and ignore the global risks that we face as a country.

Mrs Moon: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that also much of that disinformation on social media is actually generated out of Russia, China, Iran and North Korea?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady is quite right to point out that the nature of warfare and threat has changed. It is no longer purely a direct kinetic effect. It is taking place in the airwaves all around us, and it will take effect not just through social media; the potential to disrupt vital national infrastructure is becoming a tool of conflict for the future. That is one of the challenges that I feel that we, as a nation, have to face up to more than we have to date.

The attitudes that I have just described are personified by the previous career of the Leader of the Opposition. I am sorry to have to raise that again and slightly disrupt the consensus that there is across at least the two main parties, but if, God forbid, such attitudes were ever allowed to pervade public discourse and become the official policy of the Opposition, it would do irreparable harm to our national security.

Now, as in the past, the UK faces a range of threats for which conventional forces simply cannot act as sufficient deterrent. The increasing Russian aggression, which we have heard about, the upgrading of its nuclear arsenal and delivery mechanisms, will continue to threaten the potential security of the west. Other states, including Iran and North Korea, maintain their nuclear ambitions despite international pressure. The existence of 17,000 nuclear weapons in the world today shows the risk that we still face.

Fortunately, in the face of such threats, we do not stand alone. Our membership of NATO—a nuclear alliance, as has been said by others—remains the cornerstone of

[Mr Dunne]

our defence, and our decision to maintain the continuous at-sea deterrent sends a clear signal to our allies that we will continue to play our part in contributing to the security of all NATO members. It also provides NATO with another centre of decision making, alongside the primacy of our strongest ally, the United States. By sharing the burden of nuclear responsibility, we demonstrate the true collaborative nature of the nuclear alliance and of the mutual defence we are committed to upholding.

That close co-operation over our nuclear capability with the United States is at the very core of the strategic defence relationship between our two countries. It also places us in a pivotal role in offering continuing leadership to the free world. That was encapsulated by Winston Churchill in his last great speech in this place as Prime Minister, as he ushered in the era of the strategic deterrent. He said:

“Our moral and military support of the United States and our possession of nuclear weapons of the highest quality and on an appreciable scale, together with their means of delivery, will greatly reinforce the deterrent power of the free world, and will strengthen our influence within the free world.”—[*Official Report*, 1 March 1955; Vol. 537, c. 1897.]

In my view, that remains the case today and is worth our bearing in mind as we approach the challenge of life after we leave the European Union.

Britain has the opportunity, as a responsible country, to show that nuclear powers need not relentlessly pursue further proliferation. While other states seek to increase their stockpiles, we have committed to reducing our overall nuclear weapons stockpile to no more than 180 warheads by the mid-2020s, having already reduced our operationally available warheads and the number of warheads and missiles on each boat, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), the previous Defence Secretary, has just told us.

Britain has already led the way in this decade in showing that the existing stock of nuclear weapons in the world can be reduced. Next year, there will be another important milestone in that effort: the 2020 review conference of the parties to the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Our position as a P5 member of the UN Security Council provides the UK with the opportunity to continue to make the case for non-proliferation. Our work on developing disarmament verification solutions, particularly with the US, Sweden and Norway through the Quad Nuclear Verification Partnership, is helping to deliver an effective verification regime, which is essential if non-proliferation is to become a trusted way forward.

The fact that we have not had to use a nuclear weapon in conflict is a sign of their efficacy. Discouraging action through fear of consequences is the very definition of deterrence. In that respect, our continuous at-sea deterrent has been remarkably successful. A credible deterrent is not something that we can afford to relax. The skills on which it relies cannot be switched off and back on again in a time of crisis. To move away from a deterrent-based system would present an enormous risk to the country. It has not been shown how any alternatives to the deterrent would make the UK safer in the face of existential threats now and for future generations.

I point out to colleagues who believe that future risk is small enough to justify the removal of our deterrent that the world is an incredibly unpredictable place. The

Dreadnought class of submarines is due to come into service in the 2030s with a 30-year expected lifespan. Our decision to maintain the deterrent will provide the ultimate guarantee of safety for our children and grandchildren.

4.31 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome this debate. Reference has already been made to the men and women of our submarine service who have been part of Operation Relentless over the past 50 years, and I add my tribute to them. The Secretary of State rightly mentioned a group who are not remembered very often: the families of those servicemen and women, who make a great contribution in their own way to our defence. I will not name all the sites because most of them, including Barrow, have been mentioned already. I pay tribute to the industry and the men and women who work in it, not only in the supply chain but directly in maintaining our nuclear deterrent. The issues relating to our nuclear deterrent are rightly secret and do not get a great deal of attention. Today is an opportunity to say thank you, to those individuals. I accept that a level of secrecy is needed, but for anyone who wants a good tribute to that, I recommend James Jinks's and Peter Hennessy's book "The Silent Deep", which gives a fascinating insight into not only the history of our nuclear deterrent but the present-day operations.

I have always had the utmost respect for those who hold the view that Britain should not have nuclear weapons. I disagree with them, but I respect their position. What I cannot respect is the dishonest and unprincipled position of SNP Members, who argue that Britain should give up its nuclear weapons but at the same time want us to be part of a nuclear alliance—NATO. They accept that they would hide under the umbrella of NATO, but they say they have a principled objection to nuclear weapons. They cannot have both.

The post-war Attlee Government decided that Britain would become a nuclear power because they saw the rise of the threat from the Soviet Union to the post-war order that they and the west were trying to put together. It was a rules-based system, and we rightly pay tribute to the founders of NATO and other international organisations after the second world war. People such as Attlee, who lived through the second war but also saw action at Gallipoli during the first world war, were determined that this country, in the new nuclear age, would not be vulnerable to harm from those who threatened its security. That has always been a long tradition in my party. I know that recently there has been much veneration on the left of the 1945 Labour Government, but that part of the story is always conveniently airbrushed out. The formation of NATO and the beginning of our nuclear deterrent set the course of our security and has dictated it over subsequent generations. Some of the principles that were underlined then, such as mutual destruction and deterrence, have been borne out by the fact that we have not had a nuclear conflict throughout the subsequent period.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) outlined the nature of the threats that face us today. Are they different to 1945? Yes, they are. Certainly the technology is very different, but so are the threats. At the end of the cold war, there was the possibility of making more reductions in nuclear weapons, but that

has been snatched away from us by the current state of the Russian Government, who clearly do not respect the international rules-based order that our forefathers in post-war Britain helped to develop. The Russian Government wish to have their own order, which does not respect international law or nation states. Clearly, they also do not accept that nations should be able to live peacefully alongside one another.

I am clear about the need to retain our nuclear deterrent. It keeps us safe. If we could uninvent nuclear weapons tomorrow, I think most people would, but as a nation we have a proud record—and we should not forget this—of commitment to disarmament. The Secretary of State pointed out the steps that we have already taken, unilaterally, to reduce stockpiles to the minimum that is required, for example removing the WE177 nuclear bomb. It is also right for us to take an active part in moves to stop nuclear proliferation and to achieve arms reduction. That is not easy in the present climate, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend outlined, but that does not mean that we should not try. That has to be part of our overall policy. While maintaining CASD and our nuclear deterrent, we should have a strong commitment to a nuclear-free world. We can work harder at that, although it will not be easy, given the present state of the world, which looks a lot darker than it has for many years.

One threat that I do see to CASD—the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and I are at one on this—is the decision in 2010 to delay the replacement of the nuclear deterrent. That has had huge issues for the maintenance of CASD. It means that the life of our present Vanguard submarines will be extended way beyond what was designed. I pay tribute to the industry and others who are trying to do the refits, but I ask the Secretary of State to ensure that the Treasury realises that those refits, and the money available for them, are vital. We will not meet the deadlines for the Dreadnought coming on stream, but if we are not to put CASD at risk it is important that the money is made available. I accept that recently some money has come forward, but it has to be available continually over the next few years. I have no wish to be disrespectful to the Secretary of State, but in the words of Robin Day, he is—like us all—a “here today, gone tomorrow” politician. It is important to have consistency in that investment for the life extension and for Dreadnought.

It is also important not to have a repeat of what happened with the Astute submarines, when we turned off the supply tap and the skills base, later having to work to play catch-up, which led to the problems we have now. We need to think about putting investment in now, certainly on the design side, for the generation that comes after Astute or Dreadnought, for example. That is how we keep the capability, because such skills are fragile if we do not invest in them.

To finish where I started, I pay tribute to all those involved in this endeavour. It is a complex one, ensuring not just that we have CASD but that the enterprise works. That it has done so over 50 years is a remarkable feat.

4.40 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am not as qualified as many to speak in this debate, but I remind those who wish to look into the subject further that they should read the 1934 book “Peace with Honour”

by Alan Alexander Milne. He had served continuously in the first world war and in the book he wrote the reasons why war should become unacceptable—he argued for pacifism. In 1940, after he had re-enlisted, he wrote a book called “War with Honour”, in which he explained what had gone wrong.

In the middle of the 1934 book, A. A. Milne imagined a situation in which Germany attacks the United Kingdom in 1940. He asked what would happen if Russia said that it would join on our side but set various conditions. We have to understand that people have been thinking about such issues rather more deeply than, from some of the remarks we heard, the Scottish National party—but I want to leave them to one side.

I will move on to the other great person who could deal with the constitutional, policy and moral principles of nuclear deterrence: Sir Michael Quinlan. He was permanent secretary at the Department of Employment when I served there as a junior Minister. He then moved back to the Ministry of Defence, which was his real home.

While working for the Government and before he got moved to the Treasury in 1980 or ’81, he wrote some words that were not known to be his at the time:

“Our task now is to devise a system for living in peace and freedom while ensuring that nuclear weapons are never used, either to destroy or to blackmail.”

No one has yet made a serious case that our abolition of the continuous at-sea deterrent would do much to reduce the possibility of blackmail or the risk of destruction.

Mrs Moon: May I remind the House of the Budapest memorandum? Ukraine gave up its nuclear capability of 1,700 warheads and a large number of other capabilities; in return, Russia, the US and the UK agreed to secure its stability and safety.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Lady, the leader of the NATO parliamentary delegation, makes the point better than I could, and I am grateful to her for doing so.

I occasionally speculate what would have happened had not Mr Putin but his FSB predecessor become President of Russia. Had Nikolay Kovalyov become President, things might not be so rough now—nor for Ukraine—but that is not the issue.

We have to prepare for whatever happens in any major country around the world. We have to remember that one of the reasons why we had our independent deterrent was to give a second place of decision making, so that people did not rely only on the Americans being prepared to respond, but thought we might if we had to. I hope that we never do have to.

I recommend that real students of policy operating in this field get the collected correspondence of Sir Michael Quinlan and go through the essays in the book edited by Francis Bridger in 1983 for the chapter that Michael contributed. It followed on from the work of the Catholic bishops’ conference in the United States, and all that has guidance for us now. It does not say what we have to do in the future, but it gives us the reasons for where we have been in the past 50 years.

I join with others in paying tribute to the submariners and to the people in the dockyards and the like who have kept the deterrent going. One of the proudest times in my life was when I held a dinner in 2003—two years before the 200th anniversary of Nelson’s death at

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

Trafalgar—at which I sat down with two Marine generals and 38 admirals. Those admirals were there to represent the people of all ranks who had served and all the civilian contractors who had helped. We thank them.

4.44 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As the Member of Parliament for Argyll and Bute, my constituency takes in Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde at Faslane. Although I am and always will be implacably opposed to nuclear weapons being in Scotland, or anywhere else for that matter, for so long as we remain part of the United Kingdom and the UK Government insist on possession of these weapons of mass destruction, I will put on record my gratitude for the dedication and professionalism of the Royal Naval service personnel, the MOD Police, the MOD Guard Service and the civilian workforce at the base. As Scotland moves towards its independence, let me reassure them and the wider community that the naval base at Faslane will have a bright non-nuclear future. The SNP has never and will never advocate its closure. Its strategic location, allowing speedy access out into the north Atlantic while still being close to the large centres of population in central Scotland, will continue to play a vital role in Scotland's future defence post independence.

Gavin Williamson: I am curious about the hon. Gentleman's comments. What does he plan to put in Faslane if there are no nuclear submarines? They are what creates employment and wealth in that area.

Brendan O'Hara: I thank the Secretary of State. This is like having my very own straight man. Maybe we should take our act on tour. Not only will Faslane continue as the main conventional naval base for us, our allies and our friends, but it will also serve as the tri-service headquarters of an independent Scottish armed forces. The SNP's plan could not be clearer. The security of the north Atlantic and high north is paramount, and we will work with our allies to improve not just their security, but our own.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am fascinated to hear of the SNP's plans for the future of Faslane. Will the hon. Gentleman go a little further and indicate how much a future SNP Government would want to spend on developing a Scottish navy?

Brendan O'Hara: The plan has been laid out time and again. The Scottish Government are absolutely committed to the security of our border. I find the patronising tone of the "Better Togetherites" absolutely astonishing, because they seem to think that Scotland is somehow uniquely incapable of defending itself and its people as part of a greater alliance.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is impressive that the Labour Front Bench has found its voice given that the shadow Secretary of State's speech lasted five minutes and that she took no interventions. Do not take any lessons from that lot, who do not have a spine among them.

Brendan O'Hara: Indeed. I will take no such lectures.

We all know that the United Kingdom's obsession with being a nuclear power has more to do with politics than with defence. The UK's so-called independent nuclear deterrent is not really a military weapon; it is a political weapon. It is as political today as it was in 1946 when Ernest Bevin returned from the United States having seen the atomic bomb and enthusiastically declared:

"We've got to have this thing over here, whatever it costs. We've got to have the Union Jack on top of it."

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Brendan O'Hara: I will not. Sadly, those words and that sentiment seem to have dictated the thinking not just of the British establishment, but of Conservative and, sadly, Labour politicians ever since.

Let us be honest about it. Having this so-called independent nuclear deterrent is all about allowing the United Kingdom to perpetuate the myth that it is still a world superpower. Judging by the astronomical amounts of money that Members are prepared to spend on these weapons, it seems that there is no price too high. There is no price they will not pay to propagate that delusion. Eye-watering amounts of public money are being poured into weapons of mass destruction at a time when poverty and child poverty are at Dickensian levels and food bank use has never been higher.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is no word to describe the sense of betrayal felt by people who formerly supported the Labour party? The Leader of the Opposition was once the head of CND and was committed to ridding the UK of nuclear weapons, but the party now embraces them enthusiastically.

Brendan O'Hara: I will let the Leader of the Opposition speak for himself, but I find it astonishing. As a unilateralist, I could never imagine myself suddenly becoming a multilateralist.

This whole debate about the UK's desire to be a nuclear power, come what may and regardless of cost, has striking similarities to the debate we have been having on Brexit. In both cases, we are seeing a post-imperial power struggling to come to terms with, and find its place in, a changing world. Rather than accepting and being part of that new world, the UK has decided to embark on a desperate search for a better yesterday. The result is that it is almost impossible to have a reasoned debate on nuclear weapons because, for so many in this House, possession of nuclear weapons, weapons of mass destruction, has become nothing more than a national virility symbol.

Mr Kevan Jones: I have always respected people who argue on the principle that we should not have nuclear weapons, but that is not what the SNP is doing. The SNP is arguing that we should give up our weapons, but that it wants to be part of the NATO nuclear alliance, in which it would have to sit on the NATO nuclear planning group and accept the nuclear umbrella of the United States and France. Is that not a rather unprincipled position?

Brendan O'Hara: I do not think it is at all. Last time I looked, the last two Secretaries-General of NATO were from Denmark and Norway, both non-nuclear members of the NATO alliance. The logical extension of the right hon. Gentleman's argument is that NATO would somehow shun an independent Scotland due to the stance we have taken. Given the strategic importance of Scotland to the high north and the Arctic, it is inconceivable that NATO would shun an independent Scotland.

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: No, I will move on.

It remains the case that an astronomical financial commitment is required to pay for these weapons, and the detrimental effect that is having on the UK's conventional capability is being overlooked. The UK is choosing to pour billions of pounds into having nuclear weapons, which is akin to a mad dad selling off the family silverware and remortgaging the family home so that he can have the Aston Martin he has always fantasised about when all the family needs is a Ford Mondeo. That is the situation we are in.

We are here today to mark 50 years of the United Kingdom's continuous at-sea deterrent. The world has changed beyond recognition over those 50 years, and all the old certainties of the 1960s, '70s, '80s and '90s have moved on. The threats we face today are more complex and far more nuanced than they have ever been, yet we are being asked to believe that the solution remains the same: a nuclear-armed submarine patrolling the seas 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year. It is not the case.

Finally, this is one issue on which the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament, the SNP, the Labour party in Scotland, the Greens, the TUC, the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church are all agreed. We oppose nuclear weapons and having them foisted upon us, because Scotland knows that there is absolutely no moral, economic or military case for the United Kingdom possessing nuclear weapons.

4.54 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is a great honour to speak in this debate and to have the opportunity to share with the House and all those who follow our proceedings a little of the unique and extraordinary commitment and sacrifice of those who serve in our Royal Navy's submarine service, delivering our continuous at-sea deterrent—our silent service.

In the late 1950s, it became clear to the US and UK Governments that in order to ensure that those infamous words of Sir Winston Churchill,

"Indestructible retaliation...is the secret",

could be credible, nuclear deterrence needed to go out to sea, where, as Admiral Arleigh Burke, the then chief of naval operations of the US navy, said

"the real estate is free and where they are far away from me."

The creation of Polaris meant a deterrent system that could be effective because it was capable, reliable, available and invulnerable, and, most importantly, because there was the political will to use it in extremis. I always describe our nuclear deterrent as the most effective weapon of peace ever created, because by its existence and invulnerability it fulfils the modern function of

military force to prevent war. Once the power and destructive force of nuclear weapons had been created, and demonstrated, those charged with trying to maintain global order and peace after two world wars had to find a way to harness the awesome and terrifying power of these weapons to reduce future risks to populations around the world.

We have been running CASD for 50 years, and it happens, at the sharp end, because the submariners who man our strategic deterrent agree to go to sea, below the waves, for 100 days or more at a time, in the harshest of watery environments in the depths of our seas and oceans, in a long metal tube reminiscent of a caravan with no windows. It is cold and pitch black, the sea is unforgiving and corrosive, and there are inordinate pressures on the submarine hull.

I ask Members to consider for a moment that, when the sailor closes the hatches as he enters his vessel, he will not be physically able to open them again until they resurface. The pressure of the water at depth means that once he is in, there is no getting out again until he resurfaces. That happens for months at a time.

What submariners at sea most fear, however, is not the external pressure on their metal tube, the lack of fresh food or milk, the lack of internet or the inability to get Amazon to deliver. What any submariner fears most is fire. The whole submarine will fill instantly with smoke—noxious smoke, creating zero visibility, so they cannot see their hand in front of their face; choking, acrid smoke from burning oil or plastic. The relationship and interdependency between every member of a submarine crew is like that of no other team on earth—or indeed on sea.

They have only themselves to rely on. They eat four meals a day together—frozen, dried or tinned food after using up all the fresh milk, fruit and vegetables over the first few days. They work six hours on, six hours off—every day—and getting into a warm bed for four hours' sleep is normal, since the previous occupant will have just got out to go back on duty. It is not your average work routine.

We take completely for granted our ability to keep in touch with family and friends, more so than ever nowadays, through text, WhatsApp, email, a quick phone call, popping next door for a coffee with neighbours or nipping to the shops for that thing we ran out of. None of that is possible for those serving in our Royal Navy's submarine service. They and their family can send and receive one message a week—short, read by the commanding officer and potentially censored. They will not be given the message if someone is ill, or has died, until they get back from the three-month patrol. Lovers develop codes to share their affection, away from prying eyes, with ploys that Alan Turing might have been proud of. Fundamentally, however, submariners on duty on HMS Vengeance, Vanguard, Vigilant or Victorious are out of contact with the rest of the world they are protecting.

For the past 50 years, the greatest unsung heroes of CASD have been and remain, in my humble opinion, the families of those who serve. Being the wife or child of a submariner is a job that most of us will never fully understand or appreciate. These sons and daughters, wives and lovers, parent and grandparents have to be stoic and as committed to their submariner's service as the sailor himself or, since 2011, herself.

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

Imagine celebrating children's birthdays or Christmas without dad and having to remember to plan to celebrate them at another time. For children that represents a displacement of normal routines, which makes no sense to their friends at school, and for partners there are the logistics of thinking about how to include their sailor in the special events of life that happen without them when they are deployed, such as the first day at school, the first tooth, the birth of a baby, parents' evenings, broken bones from sports matches not cheered on, school plays missed, family events, weddings, funerals, and a child's first steps and first words.

The sailor misses them, but the partner not only has to experience them without being able to share the joy, the anxiety, the sadness and the grief, but has to remember that when their husband or wife, son or daughter, returns from their tour that these events have happened and need to be shared and re-experienced. The spouse also has to deal with life's challenges, which cannot be shared because of the silence in communications—things such as broken washing machines, insurance problems, money worries and decisions, problems with the in-laws and family discipline decisions. It is a strange and unique continuous stress, because it is single parenthood some of the time and then not. The spouse has to keep their children's world stable in a profoundly unstable environment; be able to remain strong alone, going to sleep every night not knowing where their sailor is or being able to tell them that they love them.

For the sailor who has been isolated from all these ordinary normal day-to-day activities, it is a real challenge to return to normal life after 100 days underwater in a pressured tube, living with a nuclear reactor and fellow sailors in very close proximity. Normal life is noisy, full of confusion and complexity, and full of events, news, gossip and change of which they have no knowledge. It falls to their spouse or parent to try to help them adjust back to shore life just for a while before they deploy again.

Submariners man our bombers—the SSBN, or sub-surface ballistic nuclear vessel, as NATO describes it—tour after tour, with some serving below the waves for 20 years. That is extraordinary commitment not only by those who serve, but by their families who silently wait for their return and keep their world going while they are away.

The continuity of delivering our strategic deterrent is critical to doing all we can as key NATO allies to maintain global peace. In the past 50 years, whether the world has been more or less stable, the white ensign has commanded respect and admiration around the globe. The challenge of delivering the continuous strategic deterrent—one achieved by the Royal Navy since HMS Resolution began this continuous deployment rotation—continues to elude many nations' navies. It requires a commitment from our manpower, from industry's ability to provide engineering resilience, a political strength in the national psyche and the sheer will to meet all those challenges—every second, of every minute, of every hour, of every day, of every week, of every month, of every year since April 1969, which is when I was born.

For the whole of my life there have been submariners willing to serve under the sea, and families willing patiently to wait for their return, to deliver the continuous

at-sea deterrent on our behalf. I pay tribute to every single one of them and thank them for their service to our nation's security over the past 50 years, as well as to all those who are yet to join the extraordinary ranks of our exceptional, world-class, silent service.

5.2 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan). I am grateful to her for how she entered into what I think should be the spirit of this debate, by giving us such a vivid account of a submariner's life underneath the waves and of their families. It was a particularly nice touch that she was dressed as a submariner for the occasion. It is also extraordinary and almost unbelievable that she herself is practically exactly the same age as the practice of continuous at-sea deterrence.

I am glad that the hon. Lady struck that tone, because the SNP spokesman, whom I respect and really quite like, which will probably be to his detriment, suggested that it was misguided of the House to take this time to honour the service and the sacrifice principally of the submariners, but also of their families and many others, in maintaining this policy of continuous at-sea deterrence. This is not the House slapping itself on the back; this is the House paying tribute to this extraordinary service. It does not matter whether one agrees with the policy of nuclear deterrence; it is right that we all say thank you to everyone who has served.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: In fairness, I did open my remarks with exactly what the hon. Gentleman has just said. I am sure that he would not want to suggest otherwise. I have no issue with such a debate, but the problem is that this is a backslapping exercise. It is turning into exactly that, and that is what we deprecate, not the service of those who serve in the armed forces.

John Woodcock: It is true that the hon. Gentleman gave a tribute at the very beginning, and then went into why this is all a terrible thing. I have to say that, for a party that believes that this debate should not be happening, SNP Members have had an awful lot to say. Well, I say that they have had an awful lot to say—what I mean is that they have taken up a lot of time.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Hang on. It is the job of the Opposition—and I wish Labour would remember this from time to time—to oppose the things that they feel they have to oppose. I know the hon. Gentleman disagrees, but millions of people across the country share our view, and it is right that their voice is represented.

John Woodcock: Okay—well, let us move on.

I want to ensure that this House gives proper thanks to all the workers involved, including shipwrights and engineers. Sometimes manufacturers and engineers in all parts of the United Kingdom—including many hundreds in jobs in Scotland—have no idea that they are contributing to the submarine programme. These are the most cutting-edge, advanced engineering and manufacturing jobs in the world, producing not only the Dreadnought-class submarines that are being developed now, but all the nuclear patrol submarines. These vessels have been built principally at Barrow, but the project has been made possible by what the Secretary of State rightly described as a national endeavour.

Although I recognise that it is difficult, I hope that the Government and the bodies responsible for awarding new medals listen to the campaign that we have launched today for a new service medal for submariners who have been on bomber patrols. We have heard about the service of this group of people, but because of the necessarily secret nature of their work—and because of their achievement in the fact that this operation has been continuous, relentless and ongoing—they have not had the opportunity to be awarded a service medal as many of their colleagues in different parts of the armed forces have for serving in particular conflicts. It would surely be fitting to advance that case as part of these 50th anniversary commemorations—celebrations, if you will. I am grateful to many in this Chamber who have already added their support to the early-day motion that I am tabling today.

Deterrence is not a perfect science. It is impossible to prove categorically what works and what does not when acting in the negative to prevent something else from happening. But I hope that even those who say that it is too expensive for the UK to maintain its submarine fleet would accept that it is no accident that the only time that the horror of nuclear war has been inflicted on the world—in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—was in a world with only one nuclear power, meaning that that nuclear power could unleash that devastation without fear of retribution.

We have to make the case time and again that the reason why the UK continues to invest in its deterrent capability is to make the horror of a nuclear war less likely, not more likely—not simply for ourselves, but for all our NATO allies. Apparently, an independent Scotland would want to remain part of NATO, under the protective umbrella of what would become an English, Welsh and Northern Irish deterrent, while casting aspersions from over the border about how morally repugnant it is that we are maintaining this service and keeping Scotland safe. I think that is the SNP's policy, but it is still quite hard to ascertain. It is possible, perhaps, that it believes that no one should have nuclear weapons—that America should take them away as well, and that we should leave ourselves at the mercy of nuclear blackmail from Russia.

Mr Kevan Jones: Was it not a misunderstanding when the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) said in response to my earlier intervention that the last two Secretaries-General of NATO came from non-nuclear nations? They do not possess nuclear weapons themselves, but they are part of a nuclear alliance. Also, if an independent Scotland was to join NATO, it would have to sit on the NATO nuclear planning group, which determines NATO nuclear policy.

John Woodcock: Absolutely. Is the SNP's position that NATO should cease to be a nuclear alliance? If so, how would that make us safer from Russia given what we know about its aggressive stance under President Putin and the way that it is proliferating, in contravention of the non-proliferation treaty, in a way that UK is not? Or is the SNP's position actually that we should leave it all to the Americans and that although we do not accept the hegemony of American global power in any other form, we are fine just to sit underneath their nuclear umbrella here? That is not a responsible position, but unfortunately it is one that we hear far too often.

I am a great admirer of the shadow Defence team for the way that they have battled to try to keep Labour's policy, on the face of it, sensible. They have been huge allies over the years. However, we cannot escape the fact that the Leader of the Opposition remains implacably opposed to the use of the deterrent, which renders it, at a stroke—

Mike Gapes: Is not the essence of nuclear deterrence that if you have nuclear weapons you have to be prepared to say that you will use them, and does not someone who says that they will never use them under any circumstances undermine the essence of that deterrence policy?

John Woodcock: They do, absolutely. It makes it very hard to imagine why a future Labour Government would continue to pour in the billions of pounds that would be needed to maintain the deterrent once they had rendered it useless.

Let me once again thank the people of Barrow, in particular, for the amazing work that they have done in serving the nation for over 100 years of the submarine, 50 of which have maintained our policy of continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence.

5.12 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, to have caught your eye in this important debate, first as a member of the Defence Committee, but also, more importantly in this context, because my father, Reginald Francois, was a naval veteran, although he served on minesweepers—as did the Chairman of the Defence Committee, incidentally—rather than as a submariner.

The silent service, or the men who wear dolphins, as they are sometimes referred to, are part of the elite of the Royal Navy—itsself the senior service—and have played a fundamental part in the defence of this country for over 100 years, since submarines first went into action in the first world war. The history of the Royal Navy submarine service since the end of the second world war was brilliantly summarised by Lord Peter Hennessy and James Jinks in their recent book, “The Silent Deep”, which tells a story of immense professionalism, bravery and courage, not least during the difficult and tense periods of the cold war when submarines regularly travelled up “around the corner”, as it was known in the submarine service, to conduct surveillance on their Soviet counterparts based on the Kola peninsula. As a senior naval officer reminded me recently, President Putin's father was a submariner, and that is one of the reasons why the Russian submarine service now benefits from such massive reinvestment. The book is an inspiring tale of men—and now, rightly, women, too—who have given unstinting service to their country down the decades and have helped to keep us free.

An epitome of this is the crews of our deterrent submarines: first, the Resolution class armed with the Polaris missile and then its later Chevaline upgrade; and then the Vanguard class armed with the Trident D5 missile. Because of the delays in the decision to proceed with the Dreadnought class, which many have referred to, those vessels are now likely to serve for up to 37 years—13 years longer than their original design life—to maintain

[Mr Mark Francois]

CASD. [Interruption.] Forgive me, gentlemen, but take it into the Tea Room next door if you do not want to listen.

While I was Minister for the Armed Forces a few years ago, I had the privilege of visiting one of the submarines based at Faslane. I remember being taken aboard by the submarine's commander and walking across the missile casings while boarding the boat. I was very conscious of the massive destructive power sitting beneath my feet. It was fascinating to be taken on a tour of one of these boats and to have the opportunity to meet members of the highly specialised and extremely dedicated crew who are part of Operation Relentless.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) pointed out so well, these sailors have been prepared to be parted from their families for months at a time, maintaining a lonely but vital vigil in the ocean depths, ready to unleash, if ultimately necessary, unacceptable levels of destruction on any potential enemy, and in so doing helping to deter them and to keep us free. We must never take those very special people or their stoic families for granted, and we should remember that there are retention issues in the service. Ministers must be mindful of that if we are to maintain CASD in the future.

Some members of CND have, in the past, argued that we have spent a great deal of money on something we will never use. Like others, including the previous Secretary of State, I believe that the reverse is true: we use this system every single day to provide the ultimate guarantee of our national security. Therefore, it is only right, and it is not backslapping, that on the 50th anniversary of these vital patrols, we in the House of Commons have an opportunity to pay heartfelt thanks to and admire the dedication of those who have manned these boats so professionally on our behalf down the years.

Part of the continuous at-sea deterrent programme involves having nuclear attack boats, on occasion, to protect the deterrent submarines. That duty will increasingly fall to the Astute class of SSNs. The Astutes are incredibly capable boats, at least on a par with the new Virginia class in the United States and arguably even better, thus making them the most effective attack submarines in the world. However, that capability does not come cheap, with a current price of around £1.25 billion per boat.

Unfortunately, the history of the Astute programme has been a chequered one, with both cost escalation and chronic delays in the production of the boats. Sadly, it is true to say that BAE Systems—I am not looking to enrage the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock)—has not covered itself in glory on the Astute class. Unfortunately, neither has Rolls-Royce, whose transfer of the production of the nuclear steam raising plant across Derby to its Raynesway facility cost some two years' delay in delivering the reactors, which had a major knock-on effect on the timeliness of the whole programme.

As a result of the delays to the Astute, there have been serious issues with the availability of British SSNs over the past five to 10 years. I reassure the Secretary of State that I will not discuss classified matters on the Floor of the House, but suffice it to say that when our

friends from the north have come visiting, we have not always been prepared to welcome them in the way that we should.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: Very briefly, because I am tight on time.

Mr Jones: The right hon. Gentleman was here when I spoke, and one of the issues was that the Conservative Government in the 1990s did not order submarines and turned off the skill base and investment that were needed. Is that not a lesson we should learn for the future, rather than just blaming BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce?

Mr Francois: I will meet the right hon. Gentleman halfway. It is true that the delay in orders had an effect—I am not denying that—but there were also management issues.

The delays to the Astute have had the unfortunate effect that the venerable Trafalgar class of SSNs has had to be run on at considerable cost. The final Trafalgar is due to leave service in around 2022 and the seventh Astute boat is not due to enter service until 2024. In fairness, to respond to the right hon. Gentleman's point, I know that the senior management of BAE, right up to and including the chief executive, are fully aware of the problems with the programme and have taken executive action to try to address them. I hope they will continue to apply pressure to bring the boats into service as soon as possible. It is vital that we learn the hard lessons from the Astute programme to make sure that the Dreadnought programme runs effectively to both time and cost; the defence of the realm demands no less.

I wish to pay full tribute to the men and women of the Royal Navy who have selflessly carried out their vital task for 50 years so that those of us in the United Kingdom can sleep safely in our beds at night. We owe a great debt to those who wear dolphins, and it is appropriate that we salute them in the House of Commons this afternoon. We are not backslapping; we stand here in admiration.

5.20 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said that he did not want to get involved in struggles with chimney sweeps, which seemed somehow a nod towards the concept of deterrence. However, as I am afraid is normal for contributions from the Scottish National party, he spent most of his speech attacking Labour party policy and the Labour party. It was more about internal politics in Scotland, I feel, than the national issue we are discussing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) made an excellent speech reaffirming current Labour party policy, in line with long-standing party policy and indeed the bipartisan policy of British Governments of both parties. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) drew attention to the Attlee-Bevan Government's record in developing the nuclear deterrent; not, as seems to have been implied, in some bombastic gesture but in response to being cut off from nuclear information by the McMahon Act. They had to decide whether Britain was to maintain an independent capability, and they made the right decision.

Today, we are discussing the 50th anniversary of HMS Resolution, built under the Wilson Government, which first sailed in April 1969. As has been mentioned, under the last Labour Government, a resolution of this House was carried overwhelmingly to renew that capability. It is only a shame, as I said in interventions, that the Cameron coalition Government did not go through with that. That caused considerable delay and dislocation not only to the industry but to the operation of the CASD, which had to be maintained at considerably increased maintenance costs.

That, frankly, only reinforces my view of the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron: deep down, he was shallow. There was very little there. He believed in very little, and he allowed himself to be dragged around by the Liberal Democrats, while they pursued all sorts of fanciful alternatives for maintaining a nuclear deterrent, whether land-based or cruise missiles. It is interesting today that while there have been genuine and proper disagreements about whether we should have a nuclear deterrent at all, there has been no mention of those fanciful alternatives that were basically a way of kicking the can down the road. That seems to have been the default setting of Conservative Governments since 2010.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I wonder if there is something we could agree on: the decision taken by Cameron and Osborne to depart from Labour's practice of having funding for this programme outside of the Defence budget. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that was the right or wrong thing to do?

John Spellar: I could wax lyrical about the deficiencies of George Osborne's stewardship of the Treasury, but probably not within the time allowed. I move on to the broader issue. My right hon. Friend rightly drew attention to the view that the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the cold war rendered deterrence—and much of conventional defence—redundant. We had "Options for Change", with huge dislocations. Frankly, when I came into the Defence Ministry in 1997, we were still dealing with the aftermath. If, however, we leave on one side any points about the issues then, it is now absolutely clear that a complacent attitude is no longer tenable. State and non-state threats have increased, are increasing, and need to be confronted and contained. Threats are a combination—are they not?—of capability, intention and doctrine. What we are seeing from Russia is a worrying and alarming increase in activity in all those areas. We are seeing the clear development of a nuclear doctrine in Russia, including in short-range, non-strategic nuclear weapons in the form of the Gerasimov doctrine.

The Defence Committee report, "Missile Misdemeanours: Russia and the INF Treaty", goes into some detail about the several and continuing breaches of the INF treaty by Russia. Such breaches were agreed by all NATO states at the recent meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers, who made it very clear that, frankly, Russia is tearing up that agreement. Indeed, in response to the United States calling it out on this, Russia has also moved away from that treaty. I must say that that may have worrying implications for the strategic arms reduction treaty negotiations on strategic weapons, and we should be arguing—in NATO, but also in other forums—for maintaining those discussions. If Ronald Reagan could come to many such agreements, quite frankly, the United States should now

be able to do so. Let us be clear, however, who is the prime instigator in breaching these agreements—it is Russia.

One of the things that worries me sometimes about these debates, including on the INF, is that for me they are very reminiscent of the time of the cruise missiles issue. People campaigned in this country against cruise missiles, and I always found it slightly perverse that they were more concerned with campaigning against the missiles pointing in the other direction than with campaigning against the SS-20s pointing in our direction. Those missiles were changing the strategic balance in Europe, which was why leading social democrat figures, such as Helmut Schmidt, were arguing for cruise missiles to maintain the balance and therefore to maintain peace in Europe, and were showing resolution in doing so.

We are also seeing such activities away from the nuclear field. We are seeing a preparedness to use force in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as cyber-attacks on the Baltic countries and massive exercises within the Baltic region. We have to be clear that, while nuclear is awful and almost unimaginable, conventional warfare is also awful. That was summed up by General Sherman in the 19th century when he said that "War is hell". Yes, we all remember the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but that conflict also saw the firebombing of Tokyo, in which hundreds of thousands died, and the bombings of Hamburg and of Dresden, let alone the bombings on our own soil.

Carol Monaghan: Is the right hon. Gentleman suggesting that indiscriminate bombing is actually okay and an acceptable part of warfare?

John Spellar: Quite the opposite: I am saying that warfare results in devastation and a huge loss of life, as indeed we are seeing in Syria today. The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) drew attention to the seminal work of Sir Michael Quinlan on nuclear strategy, and one of the points he made very strongly in all his works was that conventional warfare, particularly with modern technology, has awful consequences. We must therefore try to contain, if not abolish, warfare, and rather than just focus on one aspect of warfare, that is the important issue we have to address.

Some believe that maintaining the peace is achieved by disarmament or by pacifism. I argue that history demonstrates that peace is better maintained by preparedness and vigilance. That is why continuous at-sea deterrence has been so critical in keeping the peace for the past 50 years and why we owe so much to those who operate it around the clock and those who build it and maintain it around the country. It may be a silent service, but this anniversary gives us the opportunity to both acknowledge and praise it.

5.30 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow what I thought was an excellent speech by the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar). He sums up the ethical as well as the practical case for why we need a continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent.

This has been a really good debate. I praise my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, who set out very

[Mr Simon Clarke]

crisply why we need to do this and why it is so much in our strategic interest to make sure we have this level of protection. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) referred to “The Silent Deep” by Hennessy and Jinks. That excellent book sets out the debt we owe to the technological brilliance of scientists and engineers; the political resolve of successive Governments and diplomats to ensure we acquire the technology; and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) pointed out, the personal courage, sacrifice and professionalism of thousands of submariners and their families down the decades. Even as we speak, our forces are keeping us safe. As we sleep tonight, they will be keeping us safe. That is a debt that we can never really adequately repay and the least we can do is spend time in this House today to put on record our gratitude and thanks for their service.

Churchill referred to the Spitfire as a machine of colossal and shattering power. These submarines, in their own way, are our modern answer to that. It is a power that we all hope and pray will never have to be unleashed, but as the right hon. Member for Warley pointed out, the mere fact of its existence makes not just nuclear but all war less likely. If we think about the 1960s and 1970s and the superpower conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, it seems to me that it is almost inevitable at some point that that would have flared into a conflict had it not been prevented by the fact that the consequences of that conflict would have been unthinkable. The act of crossing into West Berlin would have come at too high a price to pay. That remains, still, the fundamental basis for why we need the deterrent.

In the world we live in today, Theodore Roosevelt’s adage to “walk softly and carry a big stick” seems never to have been more apposite. There is the presence, we must acknowledge, of real evil in our world. It is intense and increasingly unpredictable. Whether it be Iran, North Korea or Russia, we all know that there are malign forces in this world who will not act by the rules that we act by, who will not live by the values that we live by, and who set very little value in the sanctity or dignity of human life. That is what we are up against. That is the choice that, as democratic politicians in one of the most powerful countries in the world, it behoves us to make. We would be failing not just ourselves but the rest of the world were we to duck that responsibility.

There was a window in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union when we heard much talk about the peace dividend, but I am a great believer in what Vice-President Cheney said when he said that the “only dividend of peace is peace”. We should not in any way to attempt to do defence on the cheap, or without the resources and tools to make sure we can keep ourselves safe. That is why it is so welcome that the decision to launch the Successor class programme has been made. Indeed, as my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) pointed out, it is crucial that we get regular updates and focus on continuing that programme at pace. We cannot afford further slippage. Frankly, we are already at the limit of what we can expect the Vanguard class to continue to deliver.

It is also why we have brave Labour MPs on the Opposition Benches making the case for why we need the strategic nuclear deterrent. This is not a debate for partisanship.

John Spellar: I do not regard it as an act of outstanding courage to speak in support of long-standing and current Labour party policy.

Mr Clarke: I am absolutely delighted that the right hon. Gentleman regards this as an item of faith and that it will be pursued. However, the Leader of the Opposition, the shadow Chancellor, the shadow Home Secretary and indeed, the shadow Defence Secretary voted against the motion of 18 July 2016 in which this House pledged to renew the deterrent, so there is a question over this. Anyone who has seen—certainly in my part of the world—the actions of Labour activists and the noises they make will know that they do not suggest that this is in any way a question settled beyond doubt. That is important and I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Warley for making that case. This should come from both traditions.

Mr Kevan Jones: I know that it has become Tory party policy for there to be a pick and mix on which policy Members support, but one thing I would say about the Leader of the Opposition is that he has made it very clear since becoming leader that he sees the primacy of Labour party conference policy.

Mr Clarke: On that note of great unity, let us resolve the matter there. I very much hope that the Leader of the Opposition is listening to this debate and that he heeds the wise words of the right hon. Gentleman.

Quite simply, there is no value to someone being morally pure if they are dead. That is something that we need to underscore time and again in this debate. Our way of life in the west—compassionate, sometimes chaotic, but above all, free—is underpinned only by the security of our defences. That is the ultimate litmus test of our ability to continue to live our lives free in the way that we want to. We owe a debt to those people, who are, frankly, unheralded and very often forgotten about, including by me—I cannot be alone in taking it totally for granted that we have that deterrent ability. When we think about what it requires of the sailors involved and their families to live that life day in, day out, for years, it brings home how much they have contributed. The fact that we have not had another nuclear weapon deployed since 1945 is not an accident; it is precisely because of the principle of deterrence. I think that principle will endure, because I can see no way in which these weapons can be uninvented, and therefore, I see no realistic situation in which we will ever be able to totally disarm.

To answer the Scottish nationalists’ point, the United Kingdom does maintain the minimum possible deterrent consistent with being able to deploy it as required. We are not in any way reckless about it. I absolutely pray that we never have to use it, but the point stands that we must make the message very clear to the rest of the world that we would use it if this country or our allies were attacked in such a barbarous fashion. That applies not only to direct nuclear attack, but to biological and chemical weapons, because those are weapons that need to be understood to be abhorrent and we must have the ability to counteract them if required.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is wrong when he says that the Government are not reckless. They have not decommissioned a nuclear submarine since 1980. The National Audit Office said last week that the UK is at risk of becoming an irresponsible nuclear power, so he is just wrong when he says that.

Mr Clarke: This debate is about the principle of deterrence. On the decommissioning of the boats—*[Interruption.]* On the decommissioning of the boats, the MOD will make provision to make sure that they are put away, but the point about this debate is—*[Interruption.]* That is under way. The point is that we have—*[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, I am getting heckled—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: By all means.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman should speak to his colleague, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan)—perhaps she can educate him.

Mr Clarke: The principle of the debate is whether we should have the nuclear deterrent. The Scottish nationalists, for a mixture of bizarre self-loathing of this country and political opportunism—*[Interruption.]* No. I am proud to come from a country that will defend ourselves and our allies. If that is good enough for the United Kingdom, it is certainly good enough for Scotland. The only negative tone in this entire debate has been injected, by common accord, by SNP Members. They are the only ones who want to divide the House—

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: No, I will not give way. I have had enough negative carping from a bunch of people who, frankly, bring great discredit upon their own country by their constant negativity and the way in which they are the sole dissenting voice in a country that otherwise widely recognises our responsibilities to ourselves and others to stand up for what we believe in. If they will not do it, I certainly will.

In this resolve, we must never falter, because in the end there are those relying on us not to falter in our duties. We must not falter in our duty of gratitude and respect nor in our duty to uphold the military covenant to those who discharge this duty on our behalf. We are very fortunate to have them, and we are very fortunate to have the deterrent. Long may it continue.

5.39 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke).

I want to make a couple of what I consider to be very important points, but let me begin by saying that I think it is really good that the British Parliament is discussing this fundamental issue. I have agreed with most of the speeches that I have heard today—although I have disagreed with the Scottish National party—but I think it important for us to recognise that we sometimes need that clash of views, that clash of opinions, to establish

better public policy. I say that as someone who utterly supports the continuous at-sea deterrent. However, I also strongly believe that it is representative of, and to an extent a political declaration of, the importance of our country on the world stage.

I have no problem at all with stating that view. It is not an old-fashioned view, as was suggested earlier, and it is not a view that Members should somehow not be proud of expressing in this Parliament. We are a senior member of NATO; we are a senior power in the world; and we are a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Those are fundamental matters for our country, and they bring with them fundamental responsibilities. In my opinion—which is not held by everyone in the Chamber—those responsibilities mean something when it comes to military deployment, diplomacy, and our view of the world. I think that our country makes a massive contribution to stability and peace in many parts of the world, and part of that contribution is the deterrent.

I was very pleased that the Secretary of State—and, indeed, many other Members—observed that we spend a lot of time in this Parliament simply asserting the need for the deterrent. We do not argue the case. We do not take on, in a proper, intellectual way, those who oppose it. We simply dismiss their opposition, and I think that that is wrong. As was pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), it is perfectly possible, and feasible, and a philosophy that some people support, that having a nuclear deterrent is fundamentally wrong. We should accept that philosophy and argue with it, rather than simply dismissing it.

I think that some of the arguments that have been advanced are very important, but I also think that the argument has to be won in our country again. I have to tell the Minister, as someone who supports the deterrent, that mine is not a view held universally across the country. *[Interruption.]* Not just in Scotland, but throughout the UK, there are people—people in my own party, people in my own family, people in my own community—who do not agree with what I am saying. They will ask me, for example, “Vernon, how does having nuclear weapons defend us against terrorism?” Well, of course they are not meant to defend us against terrorism, but it is no good just saying that; it is necessary to argue it.

We have other ways of defending ourselves against terrorism, through, for instance, special forces, policing and Prevent. However, as many other Members have said, we are witnessing a rise in the activities of Russia and other states, and not simply rogue states. We used to say, “There are rogue states: what happens if North Korea...?” However, it is not about that; it is about what is actually happening in the state of Russia, which, as far as I can see, is a very real threat to our country, to western Europe and to democracy. But we have to explain that, and put that point of view.

Many of my constituents do not see Russia as a threat, in terms of its using nuclear weapons against us, and do not understand why we have to have nuclear weapons to deter it. It is therefore incumbent on people like me to say that it is important for the stability of the alliance—the stability on which NATO vis-à-vis Russia works—that that nuclear deterrent is in place. I think that the concept of mutually assured destruction does bring stability, but it is necessary to argue that constantly.

[Vernon Coaker]

Similarly, I understand where the SNP is coming from, and I think it is perfectly legitimate to challenge its members, and to say, “You may have a non-nuclear policy in terms of Scotland, but how does that fit with membership of the NATO alliance?” That is a perfectly reasonable thing to ask. It is not dismissing what they are saying, but it is a challenge.

It is not only people in this Parliament who challenge that. Scottish National party Members know that at their conference in 2012, people resigned from the party because they saw it as a betrayal of policy to hold that a non-nuclear Scotland could still be a member of NATO, as NATO was a nuclear alliance. Indeed, one person said:

“I cannot belong to a party that quite rightly does not wish to hold nuclear weapons on its soil but wishes to join a first-strike nuclear alliance.”

That is a challenge to the SNP. I am not condemning that, but that is a challenge. Members of the SNP will have that argument within the party. All I am saying is, I believe in a continuous at-sea deterrent, and therefore it is important that I argue why I think that brings stability to our country.

President Obama made a brilliant speech in Prague, which inspired the world, in which he talked about global zero. He said he wanted a world where nuclear weapons did not exist. The challenge for people like me, and the challenge for this Parliament, and for the Defence Secretary, the Chair of the Defence Committee and all my hon. Friends, is, do we share that ambition? When has this Parliament ever debated how we re-energise, re-enthuse the drive for multilateral nuclear disarmament?

The Secretary of State rightly pointed to the fact that the last Labour Government and this Government, to be fair, have reduced the number of nuclear weapons and nuclear warheads. Who has got a clue that we have done that? The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) will condemn any possession of nuclear weapons. That is a reasonable position to adopt. As for those of us who support that deterrent, how often have we gone out and explained to the British public that we believe that we can still defend our own country, but we can do it with fewer warheads, fewer missiles, in our submarines? That is a challenge as well.

How do we re-energise the non-proliferation treaty? How do we re-energise multilateral talks? These are big strategic questions for our country—even if there was an independent Scotland, they are massive strategic questions for us, and for NATO. When do we ever debate that, rather than simply hurl accusations at one another? There is a real need for that debate. I ask the Defence Secretary, how do we re-energise those non-proliferation talks, that non-proliferation treaty? Do we really mean that we want a multilateral process that leads to global zero?

Caroline Lucas: On that issue—a good issue—of how we revitalise multilateral talks, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we would have a better chance if our Government had taken up their potential seat at the negotiations for the UN ban treaty, which had 122 countries supporting it? That is multilateral; it is exactly multilateral. Why were we not there?

Vernon Coaker: There is a debate to be had about whether that is multilateral or not.

I believe that we are a global power. I think we are a global force for good—I am not ashamed to say that—and as part of that, our possession of nuclear weapons is accepted in the non-proliferation treaty. We legally hold those weapons, and that contributes, in my view, to global stability and peace. Alongside that, we need to be more assertive in the way that we explain that to the British public. In addition, there is a price to be paid by the Government, hon. Members and this Parliament, which is that we must drive forward on multilateral disarmament, and really mean it when we say, as President Obama did, that we want a world that is completely free of nuclear weapons. We can achieve that, but we do it together, not on our own.

5.49 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). I note his very positive and passionate input into the debate.

The United Kingdom has a very proud naval tradition spanning several centuries. Various classes of ships and, more recently, modern submarines, together with their highly trained crews and enhanced weaponry systems, have served to protect our island nation and its people effectively, either offensively or defensively as the intelligence gathering and assessments of risks and dynamics determine. I trust that the Royal Navy’s stated aim to be guardians and diplomats remains to the fore. I hope it will be a stabilising influence, preventing rather than engaging in conflict, unless needs must. Then and only then will it be used as a last resort.

The former battleship, HMS Dreadnought, was in 1915 the only one of its class to ram and sink an enemy submarine, proving itself to be a powerful deterrent. That is perhaps why a later UK submarine bore the name Dreadnought as a continuing stark reminder of powerful deterrence. The Royal Navy’s ballistic missile submarines have kept the United Kingdom and its people safe for the past half century. The Dreadnought programme maintains the UK’s posture of continuous at-sea deterrent. It will replace the Vanguard class in or around the 2030s, initially with the existing Trident missiles. It is worthy of note—this has been said before—that since 2010, the Government have reduced the number of operational warheads available to our submarines. I believe that is a step in the right direction.

We are proud that the UK’s strategic nuclear deterrent is located in Scotland at Her Majesty’s naval base on the Clyde. For some, that may be controversial; others may experience a form of military nimbyism. However, the facility provides significant employment opportunities. I understand that by 2020, Scotland is set to host the entire Royal Navy submarine fleet. That will potentially increase the number of military and civilian employees from approximately 6,800 to a staggering 8,500 in Argyll and Bute.

Carol Monaghan: Even if the hon. Gentleman’s figures about the number of people directly involved in the Trident programme are correct, the renewal programme will cost £200 billion. For 6,000 jobs, or whatever figure he cited, that works out at more than £29 million per employee. That is quite an expensive job creation scheme.

Bill Grant: I am not sure what abacus the hon. Lady has bought or where she purchased it. I would return her abacus or calculator to where she bought it and ask them to check that it is indeed accurate.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I think the point that my hon. Friend is making is that we cannot put a price on safety, security and the ability to sleep at night. Those people give their lives to keep us safe, and there is an impact on their families. It is a peripheral benefit that there are jobs for the people of Scotland. I find it demeaning that the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) says that that is not a fair price to pay.

Bill Grant: The word we are looking for when we talk about the protection of our country and its people is “priceless”.

It would be remiss of me to fail to mention the delayed safe disposal of the end-of-life nuclear submarines, which have been mentioned. It has been some time; that point was well made. I understand that the Government are in constructive negotiations to resolve that somewhat belated, but very important, project. I am sure they will do so, because we have to resolve it.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Can the hon. Gentleman tell me three things? How are those negotiations going, who are they happening with, and should there be a public inquiry?

Bill Grant: I am sure it will come as no surprise that I am not privy to those discussions and conversations. *[Interruption.]* My goodness me! I am entitled to talk. Is the hon. Gentleman taking away that entitlement of fellow parliamentarians now? What a question to the MOD!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Can we restore some semblance of politeness to this debate? It is an important debate, and it was going quite well. I do not want the other end of the Chamber to descend into a shouting match. I really mean that. It is important that we discuss this important issue and respect each other’s views.

Bill Grant: I apologise if I have caused any inconvenience to the Chamber this afternoon.

What is most important in this debate is that I, as a proud Scot, a proud parliamentarian and a proud Unionist, pass on my thanks and those of many others to the submariners, past and present, for keeping us safe for half a century, all day, every day, for 18,250 consecutive days. They are rightly proud of that record, and we should be proud of them.

I hope that the Minister agrees that we should never lose sight of the focus of the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and that he can confirm today that it remains the UK’s long-term goal to be part of a world without nuclear weapons.

5.55 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): When I rose to make my maiden speech on 1 July 2015, I touched on the Trident programme, because it is close to my heart. In fact, it is very close to my constituency. At the time, I mentioned that Trident seemed to be a bit of an abstract

concept. People know it is out there, but they do not know what it is, how much it costs, how much it cannot be used and what it is actually doing as a deterrent.

If people stand on the shore of my constituency, they will often see Vanguard class submarines moving silently through the deep waters. They catch the sunlight, which shimmers along their long, sleek, black bodies as they cut through the surface of the water. Their colour may suggest giant eels, but they lack the elegance. They are, however, engineering marvels. It takes some doing to fire a missile from beneath the water’s surface, project it through the water until it breaks free, and manage two controlled explosions that project the missile to a pre-defined target where ballistic missiles carrying nuclear warheads are released and either explode on impact or are exploded automatically at the required height to cause maximum death and destruction. Mankind has never lacked ingenuity when it comes to inventing ways of killing each other. I cannot help but wonder what else we could have achieved with all that time, effort, ingenuity and money.

The issue we have is that successive Governments of the United Kingdom have supported and expanded the nuclear weapons programme at eye-watering cost. Why? When I sit in the House of Commons, I talk to many Members who support Trident. I can tell them that these weapons can kill tens of millions of people. But they know that. I can tell them that the watershed will be poisoned, crops will fail and many more will die in the most degrading ways from famine, pestilence and plague. But they know that. I can share stories of survivors, such as Setsuko Thurlow, who told me of people falling to the ground, bellies extended and bursting as they hit the ground, of people trying to carry their own eyes that had fallen out of their heads, and of people with their flesh falling off their bones as they died in agony.

I can also tell Members that WMD have not stopped wars across the globe from Vietnam to Afghanistan. But they know that. I can tell them that WMD are no protection from terrorism. But they know that. I can tell them that the £205 billion could be spent on health, education, housing, transport or even financing our conventional armed forces. But they know that, too.

The majority of supporters of WMD are just like me with one vital difference. They believe that WMD are a deterrent. They believe their existence has kept us safe. As those weapons have existed during a period in which we have avoided wars on the scale of the first and second world wars, I can see where they are coming from. If people believe that keeping their guard up is keeping them safe, then lowering their guard is a frightening thing to do. In this case, they are so frightened that they are prepared to carry out the greatest atrocity humankind has ever perpetrated, and have it done in their name. Well, not in my name. Not all countries believe that nuclear warfare is required. Maybe as many as nine countries feel the need to have nuclear weapons, out of 200.

Dr Julian Lewis: I make one point for the hon. Gentleman’s consideration—one could say exactly the same thing about poison gas, which was used in the first world war and not in the second. It was not used in the second because of fear of overwhelming retaliation. The British warned that we had those stocks and that

[Dr Julian Lewis]

we would retaliate not only on our own behalf but on behalf of our allies such as Russia. The question is, which keeps the peace?

Ronnie Cowan: We could say that about almost any weapon that we have managed to invent. The threat escalates because such weapons exist. We sit in this Chamber to debate all sorts of subjects, which we sometimes try to do in a fairly amicable manner. If that escalated and went beyond debate, it could turn to violence—but it does not, because we respect each other, we back off and we discuss it. We say to kids in the streets, “Don’t carry knives. If you are carrying one and I’m carrying one, someone will get stabbed.” We talk to those kids, saying, “Don’t carry those weapons,” yet here in this place our attitude towards ending war is to escalate the weapons that people can carry.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes a point about weapons being available. Does he agree with the statement of the United Nations Canberra Commission:

“So long as any state has nuclear weapons, others will want them. So long as any such weapons remain, it defies credibility that they will not one day be used, by accident, miscalculation or design...It is sheer luck that the world has escaped such catastrophe until now”?

Ronnie Cowan: I absolutely endorse that statement. I find it ironic that we are debating this as we head out of the most effective peacekeeping organisation in Europe, the European Union. When we sit down with representatives of foreign countries on a day-to-day basis to discuss all things political, that breeds understanding and co-operation. It generates trade and mutually beneficial outcomes. We can travel and experience life through others’ eyes. We can experience their culture and values. We gain better understanding of them and of ourselves. That is a deterrent; that leads to peace.

Threats just lead to the escalation of threats. That is why some feel the need to replace and upgrade our WMD systems, but all that does is to put us into an upward spiral of mistrust and an ever increasing cost to maintain and develop our deterrent. We have 20 submarines that require decommissioning at an estimated cost of £7.5 billion. Since the end of the cold war, the ballistic missiles that would carry the nuclear payload have not been targeted at any specified location, which raises the question of the legality of the commanding officer giving the go to launch the missile when he does not know the target, and so does not know if it is legal—yet we ask him to do that.

We must ask serious questions of the existing system and its proposed replacement. The advent of underwater drone technologies and cyber-capabilities could render submarine-based nuclear systems obsolete. Can we guarantee that those weapons could not be turned on us by advanced cyber-attacks?

It cannot be denied that manufacturers of submarines, missiles and ancillary components of the Trident programme have created and supported many jobs over the years and that people employed in the sector have a right to express concerns about their employment futures. However, those people should not be held to ransom or financially blackmailed. It is not beyond the wit of man to utilise some of the existing skillsets and to retrain

others for a conventional navy, one that is fit for purpose to defend a unique coastline and the waters of the United Kingdom—currently, we do not have one.

That is what we shall do in an independent Scotland: remove the Trident programme and replace it with a military base at Faslane and Coulport, one that fits the needs of a small independent nation situated in northern Europe in the 21st century and employs the same workforce. We would actively work towards creating a more stable planet, where peace, love and understanding are valued more than weapons of mass destruction.

6.3 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I am grateful to be able to follow the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan). I respect the passion and conviction that he brings to these arguments, but I fundamentally disagree with him. The debate was opened superbly by the Secretary of State. His predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), gave an outstanding speech, as did someone we could rightly call President Moon, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon).

I rise to speak in this debate because it relates to a matter of principle for me and many of my colleagues. We have heard many things from SNP Members during the hours of this debate, but I assure the House that they do not speak for Scotland. The SNP is not Scotland, and its Members do not speak for the majority of Scots.

It is the first and most important duty of the state to ensure the safety and security of our country, and my firm belief and contention is that the continuous at-sea deterrent is essential to that. There is a clear moral case for it and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) made that case in a superb speech, so I do not intend to go over the same ground. It is our responsibility as parliamentarians to ensure that we are safe as a country and ensure not only that the peace is preserved, but that the cause of peace is promoted in the world. Peace is preserved through strength and threatened by weakness. That is the lesson of history.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is right. The fact of the matter is that the possession of nuclear weapons by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and other western countries in NATO is the peacemaker. That is the deciding factor for other countries not to attack. Being a nuclear power brings peace, but that fact has been lost in this debate by some in this Chamber.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. History shows that a balance of threat in the world is a real deterrent to aggression.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman talks about history and peace, but I remind him that 25% of the UN’s peacekeeping force during the cold war came from the four Nordic countries. What is wrong with a defence posture similar to theirs?

Stephen Kerr: As I will say later on, we are a peacekeeper and peacemaker because of our commitment to freedom and its defence. We are protected and insured against aggression by our collective will and our collective commitment to stay strong, but we must be prepared to commit resources to that end. While we are rightly

proud of our armed forces, which are the undoubtedly the best in the world—I have heard the Defence Secretary on several occasions say that they represent the best of us and the best of our Union—and proud of their operational capabilities and reach, I worry that they are simply not big enough for everything we ask of them. I remind the House, although it needs little reminder, that behind our men and women in the Queen's uniform there are families.

Scotland's national motto—the House will forgive my schoolboy Latin—is “*Nemo me impune lacessit*,” which, appropriately for this debate, means, “No one provokes me with impunity.” In Scots, we might say, “Wha daur meddle wi' me?” Our strength is not only our defence, but defence to our friends and allies in NATO, and the hon. Member for Bridgend spoke so well about the importance of the combined strengths of NATO's members. The UK is not a warmonger. We take our nuclear non-proliferation obligations seriously and remain committed, as a country, to the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons, and the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made an outstanding contribution on that point.

However, the nuclear arsenal is a vital part of western defence under the NATO umbrella. We enjoy a hard-won peace, and there has been no recent major state-on-state conflict, principally because of the strength of resolve of the members of NATO, to which I am proud that we contribute. Aggressors need to know that they will face consequences. Our love of peace should not be misinterpreted by anyone. We are resolved to protect it by being strong in the deployment of soft power through diplomacy and hard power through our armed forces. Our security is put at risk by those who would simply dismantle such capabilities. We should not glory in weapons systems. This country, rightly, does not parade its missiles, as some countries do, but we should not be ashamed of our nuclear stance.

The Leader of the Opposition, who has always opposed nuclear weapons from a position of principle, would put our country at risk if he ever sat in 10 Downing Street. Anyone aspiring to this country's greatest office of government should be prepared to put our national security front and centre, and anyone who aspires to that job must accept the important place of the nuclear deterrent in our defensive formation.

The SNP position is clearer than Labour's, and the position derives from the party's position on independence. The House needs to understand that, for the past few years, the SNP has been busy trying to build a wide coalition of support in Scotland to break up the United Kingdom, and it is doing that by pivoting, contorting and doing whatever it has to do to mop up as much support as possible.

It is not so long ago that the SNP was not just not in favour of NATO but was anti-NATO, and Alex Salmond persuaded his followers that they needed to be more realistic about the mood of the most conservative nation in these British Isles, namely the Scots, who would never wear the idea of us walking away from our obligations and responsibilities to other free people in the world. He persuaded the party that it needed to embrace the idea of NATO, and it now has this half-hearted position of saying that it would be in NATO on certain conditions. But those conditions would make Scotland an unsuitable and inappropriate member of NATO. There are many principled proponents of disarmament in the SNP.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Is it the hon. Gentleman's policy that, if Scotland votes for independence, it should not be a member of NATO?

Stephen Kerr: I will do everything in my power to make sure that Scotland remains part of the United Kingdom. Until my last breath, I will make the argument for my country remaining part of the most successful Union in hundreds of years.

I am running out of time, so I simply say that I have great respect for those who serve in our armed forces. I have met many submariners and former submariners, and I cannot but be impressed by their courage and resolve. The life these people have chosen to lead in defence of our country is one of sacrifice and commitment. They are at sea for many months, separated from family and friends, in cramped and, I would say, claustrophobic conditions.

There is no doubt in my mind about the need for a continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent. The world has changed and will continue to change, but the insurance policy of our nuclear submarine fleet and the missiles and weapons it carries is still an essential part of our national defence. We enjoy a hard-won peace, but it is a watchful peace that requires eternal vigilance by our submariners, armed forces and security forces, and they deserve the support of our nation's Parliament.

6.13 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I start by declaring an interest. My husband served on Trident submarines for most of his 17-year service in the Royal Navy. His final post before retiring was as the weapon engineer officer on HMS Victorious. He brought her through refit in Devonport and sea trials from Faslane, and he carried out the firing during the 2009 demonstration and shakedown operation off the coast of Florida. There are rumours that jelly babies are consumed during nuclear firing chain message authentications, but that is not something he would confirm before this debate.

Following the DASO firing, Victorious re-entered full service and, following an extremely busy year, the crew carried out a deterrence patrol over Christmas 2009. It gives me great pleasure to say that my granny's Christmas tree went on that patrol. When my husband finally left Victorious, he forgot to take my granny's Christmas tree. I wonder if any crew members would be able to confirm whether that Christmas tree—a little white optical fibre fellow—is still on board. For the role he played, my husband received the Commander-in-Chief, Fleet commendation, an award that still hangs proudly in our home in Whiteinch in Glasgow.

Despite my pride in my husband's service, my opposition to Trident has been constant. As a teenager my views were formed over the cold war and fears of mutually assured destruction, and my earliest political campaigns, long before I ever thought to consider Scottish independence, were against Trident. Over time the indiscriminate nature of these weapons, which are designed to cause such widespread devastation, has meant that I will never support Trident or its successor. That is regardless of whether we can afford these platforms, which, to be frank, as conventional forces are being cut to the bone, we cannot. In fact, our maritime capabilities are so depleted that we no longer have any major

[Carol Monaghan]

warships based in Scotland. This is at a time when threats from Russia are at their greatest for a generation. We have repeatedly had to rely on our allies when incursions occur. On at least two occasions in 2016, Russian submarines were suspected of operating off Faslane, and the UK had to seek assistance from its allies to help track those intruders. Those incursions fit a pattern of Russia testing defences and seeking crucial information about the Vanguard boats, namely the acoustic signature that allows them to be tracked. If Russia were able to obtain a recording of the signature, it would have serious implications for the UK's deterrent.

Are we increasing conventional capabilities to help deal with that? No: we decided to scrap the entire fleet of Nimrods. Although the Nimrods will eventually be replaced by the P-8, the first of which is expected in Lossiemouth in 2020, we have been playing Russian roulette for the past 10 years and will continue to do so unless we increase conventional capabilities, particularly around the north of Scotland. If we were to find ourselves under attack, as has happened in Crimea, our defences are being whittled down to two options: we can either nuke them or chase them away with pitchforks. How on earth does that make us safer?

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) said that the SNP does not speak for Scotland. Okay, we may not speak for some of Scotland, but our position on Trident is supported by the Scottish Government, the Scottish Labour party, the Scottish Greens, the Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church in Scotland and Scottish civil society. I would suggest that it is the Tories who are out of kilter with the Scottish people.

This is a debate to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the continuous at-sea deterrent. I take no pleasure in the money and resources that have been funnelled into this vanity project, which allows Britain to have a seat at the big boys' table at the UN, to the detriment of other parts of our armed forces. I take no pleasure in the money that is thrown into the maintenance and into the successor project, while at the same time child poverty is at the highest level that many of us have seen in our lifetime.

I pay tribute to the men, and now women, who have made the commitment to serve. People often talk about the difficulties of separation and the three-month patrols, but those who have a partner on one of the boats will know that in many ways the patrol is the most settled time. The work-up period and testing, false starts and defects mean that families cope with massive upheaval in the lead up to the actual patrol, repeatedly saying big bye-byes only to have partners return the next day and children not really knowing whether this is the time that daddy will disappear. That puts enormous strain on families and relationships—a strain that is not always recognised.

It is time that the MOD considered the realities of modern-day families. In the past, partners and families would live close to the base with a ready-made support network. Recognising that spouses have their own careers is important to a modern-day armed forces.

Submariners do an incredible job and are the most highly skilled personnel in the armed forces. They have many career options on leaving, so retention issues leave

serious skill shortages in the submarine service. The MOD has said that no submarine goes to sea without the minimum complement of suitably qualified and experienced personnel required to operate the boat safely and that vacancies are managed to ensure that safety and operational capability are never compromised, but that is done off the back of submariners. Severe shortages of suitably skilled personnel meant that, in my husband's last year in the Navy, he had six days' leave. That included weekends. That is simply not sustainable. There comes a point when pride in serving cannot make up for poor conditions of service. Ultimately, many choose between service and seeing their children grow up. I argue that despite the money being thrown at Trident, its ultimate demise will be caused by a failure to support the personnel and by gaps in critical skills.

As we mark 50 years of the continuous at-sea deterrent and recognise the dedication of those serving in the silent service, I say that the time has come to invest properly in cyber, in conventional defence and in our personnel. Despite campaigning actively against the platform, I and my hon. Friends pay tribute to those who have served and to those who continue to serve.

6.21 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a real pleasure and honour to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), because she speaks with real authority and eloquence about these issues. I am happy to speak as well in my capacity as chair of the cross-party group on nuclear disarmament. Let me put it on the record at the top of my speech that I am very happy to pay tribute to the submariners for their service to this country and to their families for the sacrifice that they make, which the hon. Lady has set out very clearly.

I do not think that there is any contradiction between paying tribute to that service and also being very clear that, for me, nuclear weapons are abhorrent. Others have said during this debate that it is inconsistent to have a nuclear deterrent if we are not prepared to use it. I absolutely agree with that, and I am very proud to say that I would not, under any circumstances, use nuclear weapons, and still less would I support the Prime Minister's position of a first use of nuclear weapons. I believe that nuclear weapons are indiscriminate, illegal and obscene.

Let us just think what that first strike, which the Prime Minister was so proud not to rule out, could really mean. The heart of a nuclear explosion reaches a temperature of several million degrees centigrade. Over a wide area, the resulting heat flash literally vaporises all human tissue. At Hiroshima, within a radius of half a mile, the only remains of the people caught in the open were their shadows burned into stone. People inside buildings will be indirectly killed by the blast and the heat effects as buildings collapse and all inflammable materials burst into flames. The immediate death rate in that area will be over 90%. Individual fires will combine to produce a fire storm as all the oxygen is consumed. As the heat rises, air is drawn in from the periphery at or near ground level. This results in lethal hurricane-force winds and perpetuates the fire as the fresh oxygen is burned. The contamination will continue potentially for hundreds of thousands of years. The Red Cross has estimated that 1 billion people around the world could face starvation as a result of a nuclear war.

Let me be very clear: I hate all war, but there is something particular about nuclear war. Simply saying that it is in the same category as other forms of war is wrong. What is wrong as well is to say that we cannot invent things that have already been invented. We saw what happened when it came to chemical weapons, biological weapons and cluster munitions being banned. If there was more support from countries such as the UK, nuclear weapons could be banned as well. There was the UN treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons, and I found it frankly outrageous that the UK Government could not even be bothered to turn up to the talks. That was a campaign that was run throughout the world. One hundred and twenty two countries supported the nuclear ban treaty. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons won the Nobel peace prize for its efforts. The treaty is a strong and comprehensive text, with the potential to achieve a world without nuclear weapons. It opened for signature in September 2017 and will enter into force when 50 states have ratified it. It has so far been signed by 70 states and ratified by 22, and more and more are signing up.

I want to counter the argument made from the Labour Benches that the treaty is somehow not multilateral. It is, not least because there is no requirement for a country to join; there is no requirement on a country to have forgone their nuclear weapons before joining. If the UK had used its considerable clout on the world stage to have really shown some leadership on this issue, there could have been at least a chance of getting the countries around the table to have gone away and begun the process multilaterally of getting rid of their weapons.

John Spellar: The hon. Lady is very critical of the United Kingdom in this respect, but did Russia, China, France and the United States—in other words, the declared nuclear weapon states—attend either? Surely this is just another cul-de-sac, whereas the real way of reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons is through negotiations, primarily between Russia and the United States initially, but then involving all the nuclear weapon states. Is not that real politics, rather than gesture politics?

Caroline Lucas: If the right hon. Gentleman really thinks that 122 countries around the world are engaging in gesture politics, I would suggest to him that it is perhaps more a gesture from him than it is from them. I believe in Britain taking a leadership role. Perhaps he does not. The constant sitting back and waiting for something else to happen—doing the wrong thing—would frankly be unconscionable.

It is very easy to characterise those of us who are against nuclear weapons as somehow not living in the real world, so perhaps I could just remind the House that there are plenty of people within the military world who do not think that nuclear weapons are a useful tool going forward. Back in 2014, senior political and diplomatic figures—including people such as the former Conservative Foreign Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former Defence Secretary Des Browne and former Foreign Secretary Lord Owen—came together with very high-ranking military personnel to say that they believe that the risks posed by nuclear weapons and the international dynamics that could lead to nuclear weapons being used are being underestimated and that those risks are insufficiently understood by world leaders.

The Government's main argument for replacing Trident appears to be that it is the ultimate insurance in an uncertain world. I argue that they fail to acknowledge that it is our very possession of nuclear weapons that is making that world more uncertain. Nor have the advocates of nuclear weapons ever explained why, if Trident is so vital to protecting us, that is not also the case for every other country in the world. The Secretary of State did not answer me at the beginning of this debate—it seems a long time ago now—when I put it to him that we have no moral arguments to put to other countries to ask them not to acquire nuclear weapons if we ourselves are not only keeping them but upgrading them. I put it to him again that a world in which every country is striving for, and potentially achieving, nuclear weapons would be an awful lot more dangerous than the world we have today.

Dr Julian Lewis: Let me try this question again. If we were to give up our nuclear weapons, which other countries that possess nuclear weapons would follow suit? Does the hon. Lady know how many nuclear warheads have been reduced as a result of us reducing our nuclear warhead totals unilaterally? The answer is a big fat zero.

Caroline Lucas: That is why one needs international processes such as the UN treaty that I have described, which is supported by 122 countries, to make that happen. Although I am personally in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament, that is not the case that I am making this afternoon. I am moving one step towards people such as hon. Members like himself—or right hon. Members like himself, perhaps, I cannot really remember—who I completely understand are never going to be persuaded by unilateral nuclear disarmament, but who I hope might be willing to engage in a serious argument about multilateral nuclear disarmament.

So far there has been very little recognition in this debate of the fact that nuclear weapons systems are themselves fallible. According to a shocking report by Chatham House, there have been 13 incidents since 1962 in which nuclear weapons have very nearly been launched. One of the most dramatic, in 1983, was when Stanislav Petrov, the duty officer in a Soviet nuclear war early-warning centre, found his system warning of the launch of five US missiles. After a few moments of agonising, he judged it, thankfully and correctly, to be a false alarm. If he had reached a different conclusion and passed the information up the control chain, that could have triggered the firing of nuclear missiles from Russia.

Deidre Brock: Parliamentary questions I have asked uncovered the shocking fact that since 2006 there have been 789 nuclear safety incidents at Coulport and Faslane, and half of the incidents at Faslane have taken place in just the past four years. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is a very serious worry that nuclear safety incidents are on the rise under the watch of a Government who should not have control of a TV remote, let alone the most dangerous weapons on the planet?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She rightly shines a spotlight on issues that far too rarely get covered in the media or even in debates such as this one.

[Caroline Lucas]

The UK Government have shamefully refused to participate in the treaty negotiations I have been describing while nevertheless claiming that they share the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world. But it is not too late to make amends. The Government should now engage constructively and work towards signing that treaty and supporting the global moves towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons. That, unlike a willingness to launch nuclear weapons and incinerate millions of innocent people, or to waste billions on a weapon that will never be used and therefore serves no evident purpose, would be the true test of a Prime Minister's leadership.

6.31 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am very pleased that we have had this excellent and important debate on the 50th anniversary of the continuous at-sea deterrent. I apologise if I do not mention every single Member who has made a contribution. It is very important, to begin with, for us to recognise where we are. The continuous at-sea deterrent is currently provided by four Vanguard class submarines carrying the Trident missile system. In July 2016, this House voted to maintain the UK's nuclear deterrent beyond the early 2030s, when the Dreadnought class submarines will replace the Vanguards. The first of the new class will enter service in the early 2030s.

One of the strong features of this debate has been the fact that many—indeed, most—Members have paid genuine tribute to the women and men, and families, who support our at-sea deterrent. It is important that this House places on record that we are truly grateful for their ongoing commitment. I think, in particular, of the contributions by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), and the right hon. Members for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) and for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), as well as the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), whose review is truly excellent. I absolutely agree with him, and I hope that the Government take his ideas forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made an important contribution. He not only, rightly, placed an emphasis on paying tribute to our servicemen and women, but made the point that all of us, collectively, who believe in the concept of deterrence need to make the case to the people of this country. He also pointed out that it is very important that we stress that none of us wants to keep nuclear weapons. We are not in favour of nuclear weapons; we want to see a peaceful world and an impetus given to the process of multilateralism.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Why, then, has not a single Labour Member of Parliament spoken out against nuclear weapons in this debate?

Wayne David: Because we take it for granted that we are all against nuclear weapons. None of us wants to see nuclear weapons being used. The most effective way to preserve peace, however, is the concept of deterrence.

Mr Kevan Jones: The alternative position is that of the SNP, which wants the UK to give up its nuclear weapons, but is quite happy to be secure under NATO's European umbrella.

Wayne David: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I will come on to the SNP's interesting position in a moment.

The case for this country's nuclear deterrent is overwhelming. It has been put forward with eloquence and determination by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) and others, but it was particularly well put by the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). I would like to quote an article that he wrote back in 2006:

"the purpose of a British nuclear deterrent remains what it has always been: to minimize the prospect of the United Kingdom being attacked by mass destruction weapons. It is not a panacea and it is not designed to forestall every type of threat. Nevertheless, the threat which it is designed to counter is so overwhelming that no other form of military capability could manage to avert it."

That was true when he wrote it and it is certainly the case today.

This is a debate that has gone on for generations; the debate about deterrence is not new. In that context, I would like to refer to one of my predecessors, a man by the name of Morgan Jones. He was the first conscientious objector elected to Parliament and he represented Caerphilly. I have produced a book on him that will be available in all good bookshops in three weeks' time. In the early 1930s, Morgan Jones, who had been a strong pacifist in the first world war and throughout the 1920s, reluctantly came to the conclusion that it was necessary for Britain to defend freedom and protect democracy by re-arming and being prepared to stand up against the evil of fascism. That is an important lesson that we should not forget today.

Some people argue that the world has changed over the past few years: the polarisation between east and west—between the free world and the so-called communist world—no longer mars the globe and we have seen the emergence of non-state players such as al-Qaeda and ISIL. The world has changed, yes, but let us be clear that the threat of state players is still with us. Recently, we have seen the development of a new style of old-style nationalism, particularly in China and Russia. I pay tribute to the way my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) has highlighted these facts very clearly. We see China becoming increasingly assertive in the South China sea—the East sea as the Vietnamese refer to it. We have also seen Russia being increasingly assertive and, I have to say, duplicitous with regard to Ukraine, Estonia and many other places.

Although the case for modern deterrence is overwhelming, one of the interesting points of the debate has been the position articulated by the Scottish National party. If anybody wants to have their cake and eat it, it is the SNP Members. We heard from the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) that they want nothing to do with the nuclear deterrent and they want Britain to abandon it. Nevertheless, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham said, they want to continue to be part of NATO, which of course is a nuclear alliance.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: While it is the hon. Gentleman's position that the workers of the world should ignite, the position of the Scottish Labour party

is the same as that of the Scottish National party. Can he explain why the Scottish Labour party is wrong and he is right?

Wayne David: I have no doubt whatever that this is not a devolved matter, so the policy that counts is that of the British Labour party. I would like to quote the manifesto on which all Labour Members were elected in 2017. It said very clearly:

“Labour supports the renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrent. As a nuclear-armed power, our country has a responsibility to fulfil our obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.”

We want to see multilateral disarmament—yes, we want to encourage that process—but we are also four-square in support of Britain’s nuclear deterrent.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I want to clarify his position from what he said in response to my last intervention. Does Scottish Labour’s policy not matter because Westminster Labour’s policy is for Trident renewal?

Wayne David: I am simply pointing out what should be blindingly obvious: decisions on these matters are made here. We all want different points of view to be expressed—we value points of view in all parts of the United Kingdom—but decisions on Britain’s nuclear deterrent are made in this House.

It is also interesting that, when we heard contributions from SNP Members, they were blasé about saying, “Yes, we don’t want the nuclear deterrent. We are quite prepared to see it shipped out of Faslane.” But what would be put in its place? They were very reluctant to give any indication of that. *[Interruption.]* Hang on a second. They talk blandly about having a Scottish navy, but how much would that cost, and what frigates would they buy? We would like to know.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald *rose—*

Wayne David: Now is that opportunity—tell us.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Let me make one thing perfectly clear—he should remember this, as his party put up a poster boy for the Better Together campaign; I do not see him in his place—when we make promises in shipbuilding, unlike him or the lot opposite him, they will not be broken.

Wayne David: That is a cardinal example of the SNP being unwilling or unable to answer a straightforward question: all talk, no action, full of hot air. That is why the SNP is getting nowhere fast in Scotland.

I want to ask one question of the Government before I sit down. We heard earlier from the Secretary of State that the Dreadnought programme is to cost £31 billion, with a contingency built in. However, not so long ago a National Audit Office report pointed out that the programme was extremely expensive, and it is. Of course, it is inevitably putting a huge strain on the MOD’s overall equipment plan. We know that the MOD budget faces enormous difficulties, so I ask the Minister whether he can make any comment about the programme’s cost and how any future cost escalation will be built in.

I also ask the Minister to return to the often put and discussed question whether the whole programme should be outside the MOD’s budget. It has been suggested

that the Treasury is reluctant, and we know that relations between the MOD and the Treasury are not too good and have not been for some time. Does he think the programme and the amount of expenditure is so important that a strong case needs to be made now to ensure that it is taken out of the MOD’s budget and considered separately?

This has been a good debate. We have all paid genuine tribute to the men and women who have kept us safe in this country. We live in a world that has changed profoundly since the decision of Clem Attlee and his Government to give the UK an independent nuclear deterrent, but deterrence is still vital, and the best way to maintain deterrence—and therefore peace—is through our continuous at-sea deterrent.

6.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): We have had a useful and important debate in which we have heard passionate arguments both in support of our continuous at-sea deterrent, and against it. I support the strong arguments made by right hon. and hon. Members for our deterrent, and while I completely disagree with those who oppose it, I do respect the fact that they have stuck to their principled views.

Before addressing some of the points raised today, I think it would be useful to remind ourselves of the continuing rationale of our independent nuclear deterrent. Following its July summit in Brussels, NATO made it clear that:

“As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.”

The UK’s independent strategic nuclear force, together with that of France, plays a vital deterrent role and contributes significantly to the overall security of the alliance. NATO also said:

“These Allies’ separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries.”

We recognise the common threats and our common purpose in facing them down. It is ultimately by standing together that we strengthen our deterrence and shore up the rules-based international order. That is what underpins NATO’s nuclear umbrella.

I now turn to the points raised during the debate today. The Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), asked me to answer a few questions, particularly on financing. As she will know and as has just been mentioned, we have the £10 billion contingency. Through that, we have been bringing forward parts of the project early so that we can try to have as much time as possible, and bring in cost savings where necessary. Of course, we are working closely with all the industry to make sure that this is delivered on time. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meets the Treasury regularly, and the Treasury fully understands the importance of our nuclear deterrent.

On Brexit, again, the Ministry of Defence continues to meet our suppliers regularly to ensure that they have robust plans, whatever the outcome of the negotiations, and that work is extensive. On the warhead, work continues to transition. We continue to refine the options and the technical solutions that will inform the final Government decision, bearing in mind that the replacement is not really required until the late 2030s or possibly even later.

[Stuart Andrew]

I have heard my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, advocate the importance of our nuclear deterrent for many years, and he always puts those points extremely effectively. He rightly pointed out the support that exists for it in this House, with the votes that have taken place on numerous occasions, and he rightly reflected the nation's support for our deterrent, with some two thirds of the population supporting it.

If I remember rightly, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) started with a quote about big willies and little willies, but I am not going to go there personally. He also said that this was a backslapping exercise, and I have to say that I think many Members on both sides of the House found that a bit out of order. This is certainly not about backslapping, because the first job of any Government is the defence of our nation. This debate is about marking the gratitude to those who have made sure that our country has remained safe.

As others have already said and pointed out, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) and the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), NATO is a nuclear alliance, and there are therefore conflicts in the position that the SNP has taken.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Stuart Andrew: No, I am still referring to the points the hon. Gentleman made, if he will just give me some time.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of decommissioning and the NAO report. I acknowledge, as does the report, that this issue is very complex. I accept that this has gone on for too long. However, the report also recognises that the Department and the Government are actually taking the initial steps. I am personally taking an interest in this—following several meetings I have had with the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard); the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), who represents Rosyth; and my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan)—and I will continue to work on it. I should make it clear that in August we completed the initial dismantling with Swiftsure, and we are now commencing with Resolution. We are working on a plan, as the first Government to do so for many years.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: That is fair enough, and I hope the Minister does make progress, which no one wants to see more than I do. May I take him back to the point he made about the Scottish National party position on NATO? An independent Scotland's place in NATO is supported by none other than the former UK ambassador to NATO, Dame Mariot Leslie, who was ambassador at the time of the coalition. She is right, is she not?

Stuart Andrew: It feels as if the Scottish National party wants to be protected by nuclear weapons but have no responsibility for them whatever.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald *rose*—

Stuart Andrew: In fairness, there were lots of speakers and I want to get through them all, and we have heard quite a lot from the hon. Gentleman today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks rightly reminds us that the deterrent is used every day. To say that it is not used is really quite an insult to all those who work so hard on our behalf. He reminded us of the growing threat, not least from Russia and North Korea, and talked about the importance of maintaining our country's independence.

The hon. Member for Bridgend made a very valid point about reminding ourselves of the importance of NATO to us, and the importance of our deterrent being an at-sea deterrent. The fact that it is hidden is very important in keeping our adversaries guessing.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) held the position I currently have. I have great admiration for him. He is clearly respected right across industry, particularly for his recent report. I will come on to prosperity later.

The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) rightly recognised the commitment to the NPT, which is really important. We do want a reduction in nuclear weapons. The question is how we go about it. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State never fears fighting our corner when it comes to the Treasury.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) said that the future of Faslane would be safe in an independent Scotland. That is a very big statement for the SNP to make without a nuclear enterprise. It would be a cause of great concern, I am sure, for the 127 Scottish companies who are in the supply chain that generates business for them of £130 million. I also wonder how many of our service personnel would actually want to serve in Scotland when they are taxed so much. It is only thanks to the mitigation of this Government that we are able to help them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stuart Andrew: I want to get through my responses to the debate. Whenever we have these debates, Scottish National party Members try to disrupt the closing speeches. I have given way once and I will carry on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan)—yes, she is wearing a submariner's sweater—spoke eloquently about the detailed day-to-day experience of servicemen and servicewomen. Having been on one of those submarines, I will be honest and say that I am not sure that I could do it. It is the thought of being in a confined space for that length of time, so the ability to do that is something I always admire. What strikes me is how proud service personnel are and how much they love doing the role.

The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) has long been an advocate of the continuous at-sea deterrent, holding many events in the House over recent years. He rightly talked about the workers in Barrow and the huge contribution they make to this national exercise. We should of course recognise the contribution made by those in all parts of the country. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport rightly pointed out the contribution those in his constituency make to the deterrent. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness talked about the medal campaign. He will

have heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State say that he will look into the issue. I will make sure we do that as quickly as possible.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) talked about his experience of going on board. I repeat my remarks about admiring the people who work in this service.

The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) rightly reminded us of the modern-day threats—not just in intentions, but in the capability that is being built up by many of our adversaries. It is important that we recognise that. He also rightly reminded us that many campaigners will talk about the weapons that we have pointing in one direction, but they never refer to the weapons that may be pointing at us.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made strong and powerful points. He was absolutely right that being a nation with a permanent seat at the UN Security Council and a member of NATO comes with a responsibility. It is important that we stand up, and successive Governments have been proud to do that. The point he made that really struck home to me was that we are pretty poor at explaining why our deterrent is needed and advocating the case for it. He is absolutely right: I do not think the public are fully aware of the growing threats that we face and the need for this in the way that people were perhaps aware in the cold war in the '80s and '90s. It is also important to remind people, as he said, that we have done a lot of work to reduce the number of weapons globally. In 1986, there were 64,500 nuclear weapons. Now, there are 14,500. This is also the 50th anniversary of the NPT and it is important that we continue to redouble our efforts to do all we can to support that.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) mentioned the ban treaty. While I respect her point of view, it fails to address the key issue that first has to be overcome if we are to achieve lasting global disarmament—that is, the security context in which we find ourselves—and does nothing to increase the trust and transparency that we really need between those nuclear states.

Finally on hon. Members' comments, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) asked about her grandmother's Christmas tree. I will try to find out if it is still on board. [*Laughter.*] And if it is, it will stay there.

It is also important to remind ourselves of the significant economic benefits that we get. Our continuous at-sea deterrent supports thousands of highly skilled jobs in hundreds of companies across the UK. BAE Systems, with around 8,000 personnel, is key in Barrow and Furness, where our submarines are designed and built, and Rolls-Royce has over 800 employees in Derby and Barrow who manufacture the plants that will power our submarines. Of course, the Atomic Weapons Establishment employs nearly 6,000 people working on manufacturing, maintaining and assuring the UK's nuclear warheads, in addition to providing nuclear threat reduction services. I have mentioned the support that the Scottish economy benefits from.

Today is essentially about marking the tremendous contribution of the people who serve to protect our country. Those submariners and their families have done so much over the last 50 years. Many of the

contributions from Members today rightly point out that these people go away from home for many, many weeks and months at a time and that is a big commitment for them to make. It is also a big commitment for the families that they leave behind. We should say a very big thank you today from us all for the support that they have given to our nation to keep it safe. I am glad that the SNP will push this to a Division, because it means that this House can again show its support for what we believe is absolutely right.

I will end by quoting Churchill's final speech to the United States Congress in 1955.

"Be careful above all things",

he said,

"not to let go of the atomic weapon until you are sure, and more than sure, that other means of preserving peace are in your hands."

Baroness Thatcher reminded Congress of that line when she addressed it herself in 1987, but she left out Churchill's next line:

"Meanwhile, never flinch, never weary, never despair."

Operation Relentless has been maintained by thousands of brave submariners since 1969—and they never have.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 241, Noes 33.

Division No. 414]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Coaker, Vernon
Afolami, Bim	Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Aldous, Peter	Cooper, Rosie
Amess, Sir David	Costa, Alberto
Andrew, Stuart	Courts, Robert
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Creagh, Mary
Argar, Edward	Dakin, Nic
Bacon, Mr Richard	David, Wayne
Baker, Mr Steve	Davies, Chris
Bebb, Guto	Davies, Mims
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Davis, rh Mr David
Benyon, rh Richard	De Cordova, Marsha
Beresford, Sir Paul	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Berry, Jake	Dodds, rh Nigel
Betts, Mr Clive	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Blackman, Bob	Donelan, Michelle
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Double, Steve
Bowie, Andrew	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Brabin, Tracy	Duguid, David
Brady, Sir Graham	Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Brokenshire, rh James	Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Ellis, Michael
Bruce, Fiona	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Bryant, Chris	Elmore, Chris
Buckland, Robert	Eustice, George
Burns, Conor	Fabricant, Michael
Burt, rh Alistair	Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Field, rh Mark
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Ford, Vicky
Cartlidge, James	Foster, Kevin
Cash, Sir William	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Caulfield, Maria	Frazer, Lucy
Chalk, Alex	Freeman, George
Charalambous, Bambos	Freer, Mike
Chishti, Rehman	Garnier, Mark
Clark, rh Greg	Gauke, rh Mr David
Clarke, Mr Simon	Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Cleverly, James	Gibb, rh Nick
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl

Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffith, Nia
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Hair, Kirstene
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hanson, rh David
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Hermon, Lady
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Khan, Afzal
 Knight, Julian
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, John
 Masterton, Paul
 Matheson, Christian
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Milton, rh Anne
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh 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, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Perry, rh Claire
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Pollard, Luke
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees, Christina
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Shannon, Jim
 Simpson, David
 Skidmore, Chris
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Royston
 Snell, Gareth
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Sobel, Alex
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spellar, rh John
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Michael

Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Twist, Liz
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Warman, Matt
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather

Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Phil
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Woodcock, John

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Rebecca Harris and
 Amanda Milling

NOES

Bardell, Hannah
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Hendry, Drew
 Hosie, Stewart

Lake, Ben
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David
 Lucas, Caroline
 Mc Nally, John
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 Monaghan, Carol
 Newlands, Gavin
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Stephens, Chris
 Thewliss, Alison
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Marion Fellows and
 Patrick Grady

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the 50th anniversary of the continuous at sea deterrent.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well. I very much doubt it is a point of order, but we shall discover. It would be a novelty—not just for the hon. Gentleman, but more widely in the House.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not know what gives you that idea. I seek your guidance and advice. It is my understanding that not a single Scottish Labour Member of Parliament voted in the Division that has just taken place. You and other hon. Members will know that that will be up on the Commons votes app fairly shortly after the Division. Can you tell the House when we can expect that to be up to confirm that not a single Scottish Labour Member of Parliament voted in favour of their own policy this evening?

Mr Speaker: Shortly.

Dr Julian Lewis *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well. Let us have a point of order from Dr Julian Lewis—the good doctor.

Dr Lewis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is there any way within the rules of order that I can point out that the nuclear deterrent has been supported on this occasion by a ratio of 7:1, which is even greater than the normal ratio whenever public opinion is tested on this very important matter?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has found his own salvation. He has registered that point. If memory serves me correctly, he might even have very marginally understated his case, because I think that seven times thirty-three equals slightly less than the figure that he attained, so I daresay he is satisfied with his endeavours.

I think that is an end to these bogus points of order, at least for today. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] Well, there will be more, but not more points of order—more by the way of clarion calls of support from the SNP Benches for the petition in the name of Mr Martyn Day.

PETITION

TV licences for over 75s

7.15 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents relating to television licences for the over-75s.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Linlithgow and Falkirk,

Declares that free TV licences to households with someone aged over 75 should remain for the foreseeable future; notes that this scheme should remain in governmental hands rather than being privatised via the BBC; further that the removal of the free TV licences will have a negative impact on some of the poorest pensioners in the constituency and across the country; further notes that one of the BBC’s proposals in the consultation is means-testing the concession by linking the free licences to Pension Credit; further that the Department for Work and Pensions’ own estimates show that nationally 40% (two in five) of those entitled to receive Pension Credit are not in receipt of the benefit and would be excluded; further that access to media, especially if frail or housebound, can reduce loneliness in older age and improve wellbeing.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reverse the planned decision to end the funding of the free TV licence to households with someone aged over 75 and the privatisation of this to the BBC.

[P002449]

Lowestoft High Street: Revitalisation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

7.17 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate because businesses on the high street in Lowestoft are really struggling at present, and there is an urgent need for government, both national and local, to work with the private sector to address the problem. If we do not do so, more businesses will close, more jobs will be lost and more livelihoods will be jeopardised. While there are specific challenges that need to be addressed in Lowestoft, this is a challenge that town centres face all around the country.

High streets are the backbone of our economy: they are at the heart of local communities; they nurture local businesses; and they provide many local jobs. Millions of people all around the country work or have worked in retail, often in town centres and often as their first experience of the workplace. High streets need to reinvent themselves, otherwise untold damage will be done to many local economies.

Businesses cannot do this on their own: there is a need for teamwork with businesses, landlords, business improvement districts, chambers of commerce, the Government and, in the case of Lowestoft, East Suffolk Council and Lowestoft Town Council all working together. Lowestoft Town Council has an important role to play with its local knowledge and contacts.

In Lowestoft, there are exciting plans to reinvigorate the local economy—making the most of offshore renewables, regenerating the local fishing industry and showcasing our tourism offer as Britain’s most easterly town, with a rich maritime heritage. However for those plans to be successful, we need a vibrant high street, a beating heart at the centre of the community.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I sought permission from him to intervene, because the high street is an issue in not only Lowestoft but Newtownards in the middle of my constituency. Some businesses in the core centre of Newtownards, in the heart of Strangford, not only have high street shops but are online. There is a success story there. Does he feel that while some can do that, not all can? We need help for the high street centrally from Westminster and regionally—perhaps defraying or reducing the rates—so that high streets can continue to be vibrant.

Peter Aldous: I am very much homing in on the issues and challenges in Lowestoft, but the problems are faced all around these islands, from the very east, which I represent, to the very west, which the hon. Gentleman represents. Business needs to adapt, and the Government have a role to play in addressing the problems. He mentioned business rates, and I will come on to that.

The challenges that the high street faces have been with us for some time. Lowestoft faced up to those and formed a business improvement district, Lowestoft Vision, which instigated initiatives that have helped to stem the rising tide, but in recent weeks there has been an alarming acceleration of shop closures. Following the relocation of Poundstretcher and the closures of BHS, Argos, the

[Peter Aldous]

Body Shop and Claire's Accessories, Beales department store, Kerrys, and long-established family businesses Coes and Cook's have all put up the closing-down signs.

The town centre in Lowestoft, which comprises Station Square, London Road North, the High Street and the surrounding streets, is in danger of being hollowed out. Last month, out of 410 premises, 75 were vacant. National retail analysis indicates that that trend will accelerate in the coming months rather than slowing down. We do not have a Debenhams in Lowestoft, but such administrations will be a recurring feature of the retail landscape.

I shall just mention London Road South in Kirkley—not technically in the town centre of Lowestoft—where in recent years the business community has come together to regenerate that particular street, that particular thoroughfare. They were very successful in doing so, but they also face challenges and I shall liaise with them about how best to assist them.

The high street is under pressure for many reasons. Those that affect all towns include the move since the 1980s towards out-of-town shopping, with the convenience of free parking right in front of the store, which is not available for shops on the high street; high rents on the high street, which are a problem because they are not sustainable for many businesses as footfall declines; the high level of business rates is a problem, as we heard, although the recent revaluation helped some businesses in Lowestoft town centre; the relentless rise of the internet, which is well documented; and the fact that as a nation we make fewer big shopping trips.

Other factors are unique to Lowestoft, such as the challenges of being a coastal town, with half the catchment area being sea and trade being seasonal; the disadvantage of ready accessibility to Norwich, which is a regional shopping and cultural centre that, much as it grieves me to say so as an Ipswich Town supporter, punches way above its weight; and Lowestoft's relatively isolated location with poor road and rail links does not help, albeit with a station right in the town centre. The situation is made worse because the A47 main road goes right through the middle of Station Square.

Numerous other obstacles to ready access at times make the town centre difficult to reach. Those include a number of congestion pinch points, repair work to the Bascule Bridge that links south and north Lowestoft, and emergency utility works, such as the sewer repairs in Station Square, which took place at the end of last year. Such barriers to getting into Lowestoft have meant that many prefer to do their shopping in Beccles, about 10 miles away. The third crossing of the port, which is being considered by the Government's Planning Inspectorate, will alleviate the problem, but its opening is some three years away.

Out-of-town shopping has not helped and the council recently faced the difficult decision of deciding whether to grant planning permission for the redevelopment of the former Zephyr Cams factory on the south Lowestoft industrial estate. The proposal would remove an eyesore at a prominent gateway to the town, but it would also enhance the attraction of out-of-town shopping to the detriment of the town centre. The relocation of the district council's offices from the town hall in the High Street has removed lunchtime shoppers, and it is unfortunate that the alternative use of the property that was lined up

fell through. It also grates with me that Suffolk County Council is relocating the Lowestoft Record Office, currently based in Lowestoft's library, to Ipswich to facilitate a regeneration project there seemingly without considering the need for a similar initiative in Lowestoft. The library, which lies between the Britten Centre and the Clapham Road car park, wants to be a key component of the regeneration of the town centre and the High Street.

While there is an urgent need for short-term measures to slow down and halt the rate of closures—I shall return to that topic later—East Suffolk Council has put forward an exciting vision for the revitalisation of the High Street, which forms part of its bid to the future high streets fund. I urge the Minister to give the bid full and favourable consideration, although I appreciate that the Department will go through a full and proper assessment process.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. His description of the challenges facing Lowestoft mirrors the situation facing my constituency, because fishing, tourism and renewables are also relevant to Cleethorpes. I am sure that the Minister will mention the Greater Grimsby town deal, a private sector-led initiative that will support Government initiatives such as the coastal communities fund, and it is vital to get the private sector involved.

Peter Aldous: My hon. Friend makes the point that coastal towns face particular challenges. There is so much in Cleethorpes that is similar to Lowestoft, and the public and private sectors need to get together as a team to address those problems. I sense that we have not been able to achieve that previously, but the clock is ticking alarmingly close to midnight, so we must get on and create that team.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), I share my hon. Friend's recognition of the isolation facing coastal communities due to the 180° of sea. Does he agree that the recently announced stronger towns fund will introduce welcome funding into such communities? Will he join me encouraging the Minister to help nudge the scheme along so that it supports not just England, but the devolved nations?

Peter Aldous: I will come on to discuss the variety of funds that we will be able to dip into, so I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. I am very interested in the fact that he referred to himself as an Ipswich Town supporter, because my eldest son Jamie also supports Ipswich Town. The Tractor Boys, as they are called, are holding up the Championship at the minute, but we hope that they will get out of relegation.

My question is about councils. My council has a regeneration project involving all the villages in the area, including the fishing villages. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that councils have an important role to play when it comes to regeneration?

Peter Aldous: I am pleased to hear that the gospel of Ipswich Town extends throughout these islands. They kick off at Brentford in about 15 minutes' time.

The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of teamwork between councils and the private sector. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) said, they need to work together. We need to grasp that nettle.

East Suffolk Council has come up with a strategy to address these problems and take full advantage of Lowestoft's unique selling point as Britain's most easterly town, which is perhaps something we have previously been rather shy in shouting about. It is also important to make the most of the regeneration opportunities that the third crossing will provide, as well as the location of the railway station at the heart of the town and the potential to blend the town centre with the modern and newly vibrant fish market.

The need to increase leisure provision is also recognised in the bid, building on what we already have with the Marina theatre and the Bethel, which is home to the Lowestoft Players. The proposal highlights Lowestoft's heritage, invariably closely associated with the sea, and seeks to provide seamless links to Ness Point, the country's most easterly point, and to the south beach via the historical Scores.

There are four distinctive interrelated areas in the proposal. First, the buildings around Station Square will be restored, with the objective of creating an area attractive to restaurants and leisure activities. It will be renamed Peto Square, after Sir Samuel Morton Peto, who built the station. The former parcel office is currently being refurbished and will be brought back into use as a visitor centre and community café.

Secondly, in the southern section of London Road North, retail uses will be consolidated around a refurbished Britten centre. The council's recent purchase of the former post office will act as a catalyst for redevelopment. The council also owns the Battery Green car park site, where significant public-private investment is envisaged to create a modern leisure hub, with the possibility of a multi-screen cinema, a gym and a hotel. This will link to the Marina theatre via a newly pedestrianised Marina Street.

Thirdly, at the northern end of London Road North, a wider range of uses is proposed. As well as retail, there will be refurbished and new build housing, community space, work units and offices.

Finally, the High Street area will become Lowestoft's heritage quarter, with a mix of independent retailers, galleries and local eateries. The town hall will be brought back into use to provide cultural and community space. The ancient pathways known as the Scores, which link the High Street to the former beach village and onwards to Ness Point, will be restored to their original condition.

Newly designated parking areas on the periphery of the High Street will cater for an increase in visitors to what will be a destination location. The Triangle marketplace will be reintroduced, with high-quality market stalls and support for a regular and varied programme of art, craft, antique and food events. The vacant space above shops could be converted into residential accommodation.

To be fair to the Government, they are not asleep on the job. They have come forward with a variety of initiatives to meet the challenges faced by high streets across the country. These include providing £10 million to help local areas clean up their streets, making them

more attractive places to work and visit; reducing the business rates bills of many small businesses and taking 600,000 businesses out of paying rates altogether; promoting the future high streets fund, which will make £675 million available to help modernise high streets and town centres; relaxing planning rules to support new homes on high streets; establishing an expert panel chaired by Sir John Timpson to diagnose the issues that affect the UK's high streets and to advise on how to make our high streets thrive; and promoting the Great British High Street awards and supporting businesses through the future high street forum. It is important that these initiatives are properly co-ordinated, sustained and adequately resourced.

There is a slight sense of *déjà vu*, because in 2012 Lowestoft was designated a Portas pilot town, but seven years on the situation has got worse. If we read the Portas review again, we see that Mary Portas came up with 28 practical recommendations. Not all of them were necessarily appropriate for all towns, but if they had been implemented and fully followed through, I sense that they would have helped to improve the situation across the UK, although I do not think that on their own they would have brought about the renaissance that our town centres so urgently need. The fact that the Portas review did not bring about the transformation that she was seeking and that we all yearned for was, in my opinion, partly down to the fact that there are so many organisations with a role to play and it is difficult to get them all working together, hence the need, as we have heard this evening, for team building.

I sense that the future high streets fund will be over-subscribed and the Government will be under pressure to hand out smaller slices of cake to a great many towns. If necessary, additional funds must be found, and it would be helpful if it was possible for funds to be pooled from the future high streets fund, the coastal communities fund and the stronger towns fund. I wrote to the Secretary of State last month seeking clarification on whether that would be possible, and I look forward to receiving his reply.

While highlighting the role of government, it is also important to mention the role of the private sector. Yes, high street businesses need national and local government to provide a level playing field with online competitors, without any grand national-style obstacles, but they also need to adapt what they offer so as to ensure that it is distinct and different from what their online competitors provide.

It should also be pointed out that some of the prime retailing area on London Road North is owned, like so much of the UK's high street, by institutional investors such as pension funds and insurance companies. Their post-war business model of letting shops on 25-year full repairing and insuring leases, with five-yearly upward-only rent reviews, to businesses with a proven track record is now outdated and largely a thing of the past.

There are examples in the big cities—at King's Cross, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham and Bristol—of such institutions playing a leading role in redeveloping business and shopping districts, helping create a distinct sense of place, with a wider variety of commercial and community activities. They have a similar role to play in smaller cities and towns, on high streets up and down the country where they own property. They need to be brought in as part of the team.

[Peter Aldous]

As I mentioned earlier, I am conscious that East Suffolk Council's vision, while exciting, may feel like a distant dream to businesses fighting for their survival on the Lowestoft High Street. There are a variety of short-term measures that could be instigated to support them now. First, East Suffolk Council should carry out a review of its car park charges. I accept that the council faces difficult budgeting challenges of its own, but all avenues should be explored to see whether it is possible to come up with a system of charges that are not a deterrent to visiting Lowestoft town centre.

Secondly, linked to that, the statutory instrument for decriminalising on-street parking in Lowestoft and across much of the rest of Suffolk must be fast-tracked. This would help prevent illegal street parking, which currently handicaps many retailers, and would be another source of income for the council, which could then be reinvested into the town centre. I urge the Minister to do all he can to encourage his colleagues at the Department for Transport to give that work the highest priority.

Thirdly, working together, Lowestoft Vision, Lowestoft Town Council, East Suffolk Council and I must ensure that Lowestoft town centre is as tidy and clean as possible this coming summer. That was not the case at times last summer, partly due to the long hot, dry spell.

Fourthly, the plans to find a new occupier for the former town hall must be stepped up. Again, I will work with Lowestoft Town Council and East Suffolk Council to help achieve that.

Looking at the role of national Government, I have three additional asks of the Minister. First, a root and branch review of business taxation needs to take place. I acknowledge that the Government have introduced the business rates relief for small businesses, but the business rates burden continues to accelerate store closures, job losses and the decline of the high street. There is the associated problem that, with business rate retention by the councils, our councils are now more reliant on business rates, and if there is a fall in the income available to them from rates, they will have less funding available for investment in services.

There needs to be a full review of business taxation, taking into account the interplay between all taxation of businesses, including business rates, corporation tax, VAT, national insurance contributions and taxes not yet used in the UK. At present, businesses on the high street are carrying too big a burden. The system is not progressive and does not properly take into account a business's profitability and ability to pay.

Secondly, to encourage the conversion to residential use of vacant town centre accommodation, particularly on upper floors, should not VAT be zero-rated on such refurbishment projects in line with the construction of new residential dwellings? Thirdly, a wider range of uses are going to take place in high streets in the future, so national and local government need to think carefully about what public sector activities should be encouraged to take place there. Should not the NHS and our schools pursue a "town centre first" approach when considering the location of surgeries, clinics, schools and colleges?

With the Brexit debate raging, there is a worry that the future of our high streets will be overlooked. That must not happen. If it does, we shall be letting down

people, communities and businesses all around the country. I believe that there is an exciting future in Lowestoft, but to get there, while limiting further business fall-out, we need a concerted effort by all, with government taking the lead. I hope that, in his reply, the Minister can provide the reassurance that people in Lowestoft are seeking.

7.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for raising this important debate. I note that, only two weeks ago, he also raised the matter with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's questions. He has raised it at length and with sagacity, and I hope to have the opportunity to respond.

The passion with which my hon. Friend has spoken about his town centre is just so exciting. In fact, the Conservative Members present here tonight and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) of the Democratic Unionist party are demonstrating that they, too, share that passion and desire for their high street. That passion is also shared by the Government. When I get up every single morning, I go to work thinking that my job in government is to oversee and drive forward the renaissance of our regions, and the high streets of our smaller towns and cities around the country are on my agenda.

I wish briefly to thank John Timpson, who carried out the Timpson review. I spoke to John last year and asked him whether he would lead the review. Initially, he said no, and the reason was that he had 2,200 shops to run. I then put it to him that it was quite a good idea to have someone who runs 2,200 shops to help the Government write their new high streets policy. I was delighted with his expert panel, and he went on to say yes. One thing that he recommended, which fed directly into the Budget, was the creation of the future high streets fund. My hon. Friend has repeatedly talked about the need for teamwork, and the prospectus for that fund explicitly sets out that the bids that succeed will have teamwork and business very much at their heart. Of course, it is not only my hon. Friend who has grabbed the opportunity of the future high streets fund—over £600 million—with gusto. More than 300 bids have been sent to the Government, and we are currently reviewing them in line with the independent bidding policy that we have put in place.

My hon. Friend talked very well about teamwork, which is hugely important. He also talked about locating public services on high streets. As well as thanking Sir John Timpson, I want to thank Bill Grimsey, who said in his Grimsey review, "Wouldn't it be refreshing if we located our libraries, GP surgeries, childcare and town halls on our high streets to ensure that people visited?" I was therefore slightly concerned to hear my hon. Friend say that Lowestoft is moving some of those very same services away from the high street, when the big push of public policy is to place the public sector absolutely at the heart of the high street.

My hon. Friend raised the short-term challenges faced by Lowestoft, particularly his desire for free parking. In my own local authority area, we have the blessing of free parking on our high street. Parking charges should always be locally determined, but I would say to local

authority leaders around the country that at the Trafford Centre—my constituents' nearest major shopping centre—the parking is free and every parking space is full, but when I visit towns that charge for parking, it is clear that many parking spaces lie empty, just as the shops will eventually lie empty if people do not visit their high streets. I urge local authorities to bear in mind my hon. Friend's comments, as well as my own.

My hon. Friend said that he is seeking UK Government action regarding a review of business rates. This is of course a question for my friends and colleagues in Her Majesty's Treasury, and he may seek to engage them more heavily on that. On the town centre first policy, he would do well to build on the good practice set out by Bill Grimsey.

Finally, we heard a brilliant contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Business rates are devolved in their entirety, so he would need to take up his point locally in Northern Ireland. I celebrate and cheer on the involvement of Northern Ireland in the Great British High Street competition for the first time last year. We are running that competition again this year, and it will be bigger, better and have more applicants, many of whom I hope will come from Northern Ireland.

7.47 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

House of Commons

Thursday 11 April 2019

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Funding for Youth Services

1. **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of the adequacy of the level of funding for local authority youth services. [910357]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): Local authorities are responsible for funding local youth services, and over the next financial year English authorities' funding for public services will increase, from £45.1 billion to £46.4 billion. In this role I have confirmed to the House that we are reviewing the guidance that sets out local authorities' duty to provide appropriate local youth services. In addition, I am delighted to announce that the Government will be developing a new youth charter setting out our vision for supporting young people over the next generation and beyond.

Karen Lee: I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs. Evidence submitted to our recent cross-party inquiry into youth work shows that the reduction in publicly funded youth services has led to the voluntary and community sectors being expected to fill the gap left by Government cuts. That has created an increasing reliance on short-term funding and the loss of qualified and experienced youth workers. Will the Minister commit herself to addressing urgently the crisis in long-term funding for youth services?

Mims Davies: I thank the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs, which has produced an excellent report on youth policy and funding. The Office for Civil Society has allocated £195 million to youth programmes, and the offer that my Department makes to enrich young people's lives, through civil society, sport, digital and culture, is very important. The new youth charter gives us a chance to continue looking at all the issues the hon. Lady has raised.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Youth services come in many different formats. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Long Eaton rugby club on its work with young people—boys and girls—which helps to provide necessary life skills through sport?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. Local authority spending on youth services has been challenged—it is absolutely right that we accept that. However, we have great local authorities and partnerships that continue to innovate to ensure that the challenging funding landscape is addressed and that the benefits are there for children across all communities.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to berate the Minister about the lack of resources in youth services, because we know that we do not have as many resources as we used to. Will she follow what we are doing in Huddersfield? We are consulting young people and asking them what they want. Nearly all of them want a safe space where they do not have to drink alcohol, with nice coffee and wi-fi. Is it not about time we supplied young people up and down our country with the safe spaces they want?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. On a Friday evening, what young people want is to be out from the rain and away from parents, with high-speed internet access and the chance to hang out with friends—to be a teenager—and that is very welcome. I met policy officials yesterday, and we will be funding such spaces very shortly. We will update the House soon.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In the borough of Kettering there are many independently run and often volunteer-led sports clubs, amateur dramatics groups, scouts, guides and cadet forces—all sorts of organisations. Is it not true that successful and diverse youth engagement does not necessarily require direct local authority control?

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree. It is right that we look at the local authority and community facilities that young people would like to engage with, and to reflect the community they live in. In fact, just this week we directed £90 million from dormant bank accounts to the newly established Youth Futures Foundation, which will support some of our most disadvantaged young people into employment. We will be working with all sorts of bodies to ensure that there are opportunities for all young people.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The Opposition welcome the Government's recognition of the importance of youth services with their commitment today to a youth charter. The Minister will be aware that there is a strong economic case for investing in youth services, with Ofsted saying that cuts are "a false economy" leading to "greater pressures elsewhere". We know that the cost of late intervention is estimated to be £17 billion a year. What concrete conversations has the Minister had with her Treasury colleagues ahead of the comprehensive spending review to ensure that the charter is not a no-cheque charter and that there is proper investment in youth services?

Mims Davies: As the Minister for youth—that is slightly embarrassing occasionally—I think it is absolutely right to be in a position to work across Government as we head toward the spending review, to make sure that there are opportunities for our young people. With the youth endowment fund we have seen £200 million to support interventions for children and young people

at risk. I absolutely agree that early intervention is right. That is why we have also pledged to review specific youth work qualifications, which were due to expire in 2020, to make sure that the youth work training curriculum is right. That is absolutely on the table.

Historic Environment

2. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the inclusion of the historic environment in the definition of the natural environment in the Environment Bill. [910358]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): I am aware that there is strong interest in the way that the Environment Bill relates to the protection of the historic environment. I want to make sure that the heritage agenda and the close interplay between the natural environment and the historic environment are appropriately reflected in that Bill. To that end, I have spoken to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about the matter, and I will be writing to him very shortly.

Kerry McCarthy: I am pleased to hear that response from the Minister, because the historic and natural environment often enhance and rely on each other. In my patch, we have the lesser horseshoe bats in Arnos Vale cemetery, the Iron Age hill fort in Leigh woods, and the work being done by the Heritage Lottery Fund in Avalon marshes. The manmade structures—the built environment—enhance and, in some ways, protect the wildlife there. Will he keep us updated on the progress of those discussions?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: these things are very closely interrelated. The Bill is specifically a natural environment Bill, but the historic environment is very closely interplayed with that. I have written to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about that. I can confirm what she says about the connection. Of course it applied recently to the inscription of the world heritage site in the Lake District.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we must do all we can to protect our great historic environment? I also wish to praise the National Trust for all the work that it does in this field, particularly in Bexleyheath where we have the Red House, a National Trust property.

Michael Ellis: Very much so. The fact of the matter is that our historic environment is important to us all. It is also a world asset—something that draws millions of people to this country. It is important to respect the environment in all its forms, and the natural environment is supported and enriched by the historic environment.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): When the Minister corresponds with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will he ensure that, prior to doing so, he makes contact with the heritage divisions in England and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure that the Environment Bill, which extends across the United Kingdom, reflects our needs?

Michael Ellis: I always want to ensure that all constituent parts of the United Kingdom are involved in these matters, as they of course are in fact as well as in law. I think that I have already written to the Secretary of State—the letter will be signed today—but we will certainly bear in mind what the hon. Gentleman says.

Online Disinformation

3. **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to tackle fake news and disinformation online. [910359]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): On Monday, my Department, in conjunction with the Home Office, published the Online Harms White Paper, which sets out our plans for a new regulatory framework for online harms underpinned by an independent regulator. As part of that framework, the regulator will publish a code of practice to ensure that platforms take proportionate steps to tackle the issue of disinformation and other forms of online manipulation.

Julie Elliott: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. I also welcome the White Paper. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, on which I serve, took a lot of information on the threat to our democracy; the White Paper is not silent on that, but it is not very talkative about it. Will he outline what steps the Government plan to take to protect our democracy?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady is right: it is an important area. The Select Committee has done very good work in drawing attention to it. As I made clear on Monday in my statement to the House, we should not see the Online Harms White Paper as the only part of the Government's response in this area; there will be other important components to it. One of those that will cover the area that she describes will be the work that the Cabinet Office is doing, which I hope we will see very shortly.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Any regulator will be effective only if it has proper sanctioning powers with teeth. With tech companies turning over billions of pounds of profits and creating untold online harm, particularly to our young people, will the Secretary of State give more information about what kind of sanctioning powers—especially financial sanctions—the regulator will have? Will he give us an idea of what he will do to make sure that companies get in line?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady is right that the sanctions available to the regulator will be important here. The White Paper includes a number of options. We will want to look at remedial notices and at fines, potentially comparable to General Data Protection Regulation fines, which, as she knows, are very substantial indeed. We will also want to consider individual director liability and, at the top end of the scale, internet service provider blocking for those websites that refuse to co-operate with what the regulator requires.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The rocket fuel for fake news and disinformation is the tidal wave of dark money flowing into dark ads that are

targeted with psychographic precision. Vote Leave has admitted breaking the rules—cheating by pumping in way over the odds during the referendum campaign—but the Secretary of State has done nothing to ensure that we have the transparency we need ahead of a possible second referendum. Will he think again and bring in the honest ads Act we have proposed, so we can finally see who is paying for what—not least the dark ads targeted at Members of this House?

Jeremy Wright: As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will recognise, it is important that the Government act collectively on this matter. As I indicated to the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), we will shortly see some work by the Cabinet Office, which will deal with some of the questions around transparency that he perfectly fairly raises. However, I hope he will also accept that this Government have given the Information Commissioner additional powers to enable her to take the sorts of actions that he would wish to see taken. Of course, it is for the Electoral Commission and the Information Commissioner to act in these spaces.

Public Libraries

4. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of access to public libraries on social mobility. [910360]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Nearly 3,000 public libraries in England received 195 million physical visits in 2017-18. That is more than all the visits to premier league football games, to cinemas and to English Heritage sites combined—and perhaps even more than to tennis matches, Mr Speaker. Everyone uses public libraries, and everyone is involved in the social mobility aspects of those libraries. It is crucial that we support them so that they give opportunities to improve the life chances and achieve the full potential of everyone.

Matt Western: Andrew Carnegie, the great Scottish-US philanthropist, once stated:

“A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert.”

However, since 2010, 605 libraries have closed in England, Wales and Scotland, and 15 of the 34 in Warwickshire have closed. Through their cuts to revenue support grant, are this Government not deserting our communities?

Michael Ellis: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s claim. The fact is that this Government are supporting local government in its work. Local government has a responsibility under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to maintain libraries and provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport’s Taking Part survey found that libraries are used by all parts of our society. They are supported by this Government and this Department.

12. [910368] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Will my hon. Friend support the campaign by the *Daily Express* to save our libraries? Will he also protect Harlow? Essex County Council is threatening to close libraries across my constituency despite having nearly £250 million in reserves.

Michael Ellis: I am aware of what is happening in Essex—my right hon. Friend wrote to me about that—and I am aware of the recent consultation by Essex County Council on proposals for its library service. DCMS is monitoring Essex County Council’s compliance with its duty. I can tell my right hon. Friend that, should DCMS receive a complaint following a final decision by the council, it will look very carefully at whether it is failing to meet its statutory duty.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Will the Minister also have a word with the people running Derbyshire County Council? They issued a statement in which they said almost every public librarian is going to lose so many hours per week. On top of that, 20 libraries in Derbyshire are due to close completely. Will he have a word with them? It is a Tory county council.

Michael Ellis: There are county councils of different colours that, clearly, are dealing with the issues the hon. Gentleman refers to. I do not accept what he says about these facts. Libraries need to be supported by all local authorities. Local authorities have a statutory duty under the 1964 Act, and the Department will continue to monitor those duties.

Music Education in Schools

5. **Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the provision of music education in schools. [910361]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The opportunity to participate in music, art and drama can be transformative for young people’s self-confidence, mental health and life chances. That is why this Government will invest £500 million in cultural education between 2016 and 2020. We are in regular discussions with colleagues at the Department for Education. The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries and the Minister for School Standards recently co-hosted a roundtable with the music industry to discuss music education.

Tracy Brabin: UK Music and the Musicians Union have recently revealed that children in households where the income is £28,000 are half as likely to learn an instrument as children in families that earn £48,000. We know, and I am sure the Secretary of State will agree, that the ability to participate in music is a gift. Will he tell us when the national plan for music will be refreshed so that students in state schools can participate in music?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady is right: it is important that all pupils have this opportunity. She will know that for pupils aged between five and 14, music is a part of the national curriculum. It is important that all children, whatever their backgrounds, have these opportunities. As she knows, we are working on a non-statutory-model music curriculum, in conjunction with some expert advisers, for key stages 1 to 3. We hope that that will be ready for introduction in the autumn term of this year.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We almost certainly will not reach Question 16, but with modest dexterity the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) could perfectly legitimately shoehorn her own inquiry into the current question.

16. [910373]**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the Secretary of State recognise that the UK music sector is hugely successful across the world, and that part of ensuring that continued success is the strength of music in our schools, which makes this a hugely important issue for our economy as well as for people's life chances in learning music?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I do agree with my right hon. Friend. Of course, as she knows, the creative industries more broadly are some of the fastest-growing sectors of our economy. We should be proud of that and encourage that development.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Mr Speaker,

"Too many politicians are being told a message that is glossy and bears little relation to the reality of what is going on."

That is what an instrumental teacher told the Musicians Union in its recent report on music education, "The State of Play". Music teacher training places are down from 850 to 250 per year since 2010, teaching staff are declining year on year, exam entries are down, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) said, there is a worsening class divide in learning an instrument. When will the Secretary of State drop the glossy rhetoric about the Government's record on music education that is so out of tune with reality?

Jeremy Wright: No one doubts the hon. Gentleman's commitment to music in this House, and he is right to be so committed, but he will get no glossy rhetoric from me: what he will get is facts, so let me give him some more. My reference to £500 million-worth of investment includes £300 million in music education hubs, which have so far reached 89% of schools. He will also know that 10% of the funding allocation for those hubs is based on the number of pupils in the area eligible for free school meals, so we are doing something to ensure that this kind of education reaches the right people.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) is not merely committed to music; I think people should be aware that he is a distinguished member of MP4—the parliamentary rock band, no less, which has performed with considerable distinction in Speaker's House and elsewhere. People should know that—it is very important.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): In Staffordshire, Entrust Music Service and Friends of Staffordshire's Young Musicians do an excellent job in bringing music tuition and music performance to young people, but we need to do a lot more. Will the Secretary of State meet me and others to discuss how we can ensure that the money that is going in is translated into reality, particularly for children in families on low incomes, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin)?

Jeremy Wright: Of course I will happily meet my hon. Friend to discuss this. He is right—there is always more that we can do. As I said in my initial answer, it is right

to look not just at music but at art and drama, too. As he will know, the Government are also taking action in those spaces to make sure that more young people who do not yet have these opportunities are given them.

Public Libraries

6. **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of internet access in public libraries. [910362]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): DCMS invested £2.6 million to install and upgrade free wi-fi in public libraries across England. I am pleased to say that over 99% of public library buildings now provide internet access. I was delighted to visit Wakefield and see the wonderful Theatre Royal, the Hepworth gallery and the Yorkshire sculpture park.

Mary Creagh: What a treat the Minister must have had in Wakefield. I urge hon. Members to visit during our wonderful year of sculpture which will start at the end of June.

We have lost three libraries in Wakefield, and across Yorkshire and the Humber we have lost more than 530 computers. So as the jobcentres are closing, we are seeing a digital exclusion double whammy. The disabled are not able to apply for jobs and universal credit, children in temporary accommodation have nowhere to do their homework, and asylum seekers at the initial accommodation centre in Wakefield have real difficulty getting internet access to register with the Home Office. Will the Minister look at provision in Wakefield?

Michael Ellis: I am always happy to look at these matters, but of course the facts are that over 99% of public library buildings now have internet access, and we have invested over £4 million on innovative library projects to improve people's digital skills, literacy, health and wellbeing. Many millions of pounds are going into that topic, but we will remain alive to those issues.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh! When one looks at the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings, one thinks not of digital, media or sport, but unfailingly of culture. I call the right hon. Gentleman.

Sir John Hayes: In that spirit, Mr Speaker, Marcel Proust said:

"There are perhaps no days of our childhood that we lived as fully as...the days we spent with a favourite book".

Getting children into libraries is critically important not only for the health of those libraries, but for the development of our collective futures. Will the Minister, the nation's librarian, confirm that he intends to begin a new initiative to bind schools and libraries together so that we can allow more children, particularly from disadvantaged homes, to enjoy the benefits of books?

Michael Ellis: I am very flattered by my right hon. Friend's question, and he makes an important point. The interplay between schools and libraries is a long-lasting

one. It enriches lives and we want to promote it at every possible opportunity. We do that by encouraging the wide use of libraries by all sections of society, and I am pleased to confirm that libraries are used by more people across all socioeconomic groups and parts of our society than any other cultural form. He is right to quote Proust, as of course he always is.

Leaving the EU: Creative Industries

7. **Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on the creative industries of the UK leaving the EU. [910363]

8. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the creative industries of the UK leaving the EU. [910364]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The effect of leaving the European Union on the UK creative industries will depend on the manner of our departure. We are engaging with businesses up and down the country, including small and medium-sized enterprises, to understand their concerns and to ensure that they are aware of Government advice, and we will continue that engagement. The UK's creative and cultural industries are respected the world over. They are an economic powerhouse, exporting services that were worth £27 billion in 2016, and we are determined to continue our support for them.

Matt Rodda: I thank the Minister for her answer. Is she aware of the scale of the concern in the Thames Valley, which is an important centre for both the IT and creative industries? When will she be able to reassure local small businesses that are thinking of relocating to the EU that the Government have a realistic plan for Brexit?

Margot James: I am very aware of the businesses in the sectors that the hon. Gentleman describes—and not just in his area—and their concerns. We are doing our best to reassure them about access to capital and talent post-Brexit, and we are well aware of their concerns.

Janet Daby: UK creatives who want their trademarks protected in the EU rely on attorneys based in EEA countries. A trademark attorney in my constituency has contacted me with concerns about the lack of clarity in the framework that will allow him to continue representing his clients after Brexit. That threatens his business. Can the Minister reassure my constituent and the £268 billion creative industries that the EU intellectual property regime will continue to apply after Brexit and, if not, what is the plan?

Margot James: I assure the hon. Lady that the Government take intellectual property very seriously indeed, and we will ensure that globally leading protections are in place as we leave the European Union.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Many grassroots music venues such as CICIC—Creative Innovation Centre CIC—in Taunton are wonderful places for bringing forward the talent going into our creative industries, yet they are suffering because they have to pay such high

business rates. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss whether they could have lower rates, like many of our retail outlets and pubs?

Margot James: My hon. Friend makes a very good point indeed. She would be well advised to raise those issues with the Treasury. We are in discussions with the Treasury on those matters, but we are doing a great many other things to support grassroots music venues, including through agent of change proposals and scrapping form 696, all of which have had a beneficial effect, certainly in the London area.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Post our departure from the EU, will the Minister ensure that she takes every possible step to maximise our opportunities in the creative industries sector right across the United Kingdom and not just in the south-east?

Margot James: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we take on those responsibilities, and he will be pleased to hear that I spend more of my time focused on the creative industries outside London and the south-east. We have national skills programmes in the north-west and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and I am sure that we shall support the creative industries in the Northern Ireland, which are doing such a fantastic job, equally.

Digital Skills: Elderly in Rural Areas

9. **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help elderly people in rural areas learn digital skills. [910365]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): Some 75% of those in this country with no digital skills are aged 65 or above. My Department has launched the digital inclusion innovation fund, which is designed to tackle digital exclusion, particularly among older people and people with disabilities. The Government are tackling digital exclusion by giving people the skills they need through the future digital inclusion programme. To date, the programme has supported 1 million adults to develop their basic digital skills.

Chris Davies: In order for elderly people in rural areas to learn digital skills, they must first be able to access the internet. Will my hon. Friend confirm what progress is being made in getting all rural areas connected to the internet?

Margot James: I can certainly reassure my hon. Friend on that. We have spent almost £2 billion on bringing superfast broadband to 96%-plus of UK premises and are continuing to deliver in rural and remote parts of the UK. We have just launched the £200 million rural gigabit connectivity programme to ensure that no areas are left behind when it comes to the roll-out of gigabit speeds, which will be of particular value to older people in Wales and other rural parts of the country.

13. [910369] **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): In December, Ofcom recommended that 40% of video-on-demand content should be provided with subtitles within two years and 80% within four years. Will the

Minister say whether she is prepared to introduce secondary legislation to ensure that that is done within a decent timeframe?

Margot James: The hon. Lady is quite right: on-demand programme services need to catch up. The Ofcom proposals were made at the end of last year and are receiving consideration by my Department. In the meantime, best practice guidance has been introduced. It is voluntary at the moment, but for example Netflix has made 100% of its content available with subtitles.

Society Lottery Reform

10. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): When he plans to publish a response to the public consultation on society lottery reform. [910366]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): Society lotteries are a vital source of fundraising for charities in this country, raising £300 million for good causes in 2018. Since the consultation on society lotteries reform closed, I have held many meetings with colleagues and stakeholders who reflect all sides of the debate. That process, alongside the consultation, is shaping what I intend to be a fair, balanced and future-proof package of measures that will enable all lotteries to thrive.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply, but does she agree that there is now overwhelming evidence that increasing the maximum prize for society lotteries to £1 million will have zero impact on the national lottery?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I know he feels passionately about the work of society lotteries in supporting important causes in his constituency and across the UK. I am delighted to say that I hope to be able to respond formally to the consultation on the points he raised by the summer recess.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister underline the importance of ensuring that any money set aside for administration is at an acceptable level? If something pertains to be a society lottery, the majority of its money should go to its projects and not be swallowed up in administration fees.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point—transparency about the money that goes to good causes is important, and it is no secret that I have ensured that transparency in this sector is a priority going forward.

Visitors to the UK

11. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What assessment he has made of the attractiveness of the UK as a visitor destination. [910367]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): The UK is an incredibly attractive destination for visitors, and we scored third overall top nation in the Anholt nation brands index. London was recently rated the best destination in the world by TripAdvisor. The west end is one example

of a huge hit for visitors to the UK and London, and in 2018 audiences exceeded 15.5 million and generated box office revenue of more than £765 million—both record figures.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his answer, but if I may, I would like to bring it to a more parochial level. The sunshine coast of Clacton has a proud history as a visitor destination. We had a Butlin's and we have glorious sands. As a rural community we have often been overlooked by Government initiatives in the past. What can my hon. Friend do to assure me that that will not be the case in the future?

Mr Speaker: Go to Clacton man, for goodness' sake.

Michael Ellis: The Butlin's in Clacton is on my list, Mr Speaker. I very much appreciate rural and coastal areas and understand their value. The local county council received more than £600,000 of coastal communities funding for Clacton and the Essex coast, and this January Clacton pier received £50,000 from the same fund for the "Jolly Roger" project—[*Laughter.*] That is actually what it is called. That project is supported in Clacton, and we will do everything we can to continue that.

Mr Speaker: We all look forward to seeing photographs of the Minister in Clacton with his bucket and spade.

Topical Questions

T1. [910375] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I wish to draw the House's attention to a written ministerial statement that I am making this morning. As the House will be aware, on 10 January News UK submitted an application to vary certain conditions that were put in place in 1981 by the then Secretary of State for Trade. The proposed changes will allow *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* to share journalistic resources, subject to the agreement of each newspaper's editor. I have reviewed the case, and I am minded to accept News UK's application. However, in considering the proposed new undertakings as a whole, I noted that the existing governance arrangements agreed in 1981 could be clearer and more certain regarding some roles and responsibilities. I have therefore asked my officials to consider those questions further with News UK before agreeing the application, and the full detail will be set out in the written ministerial statement.

Bob Blackman: Harrow Council has raised the rents of uniformed youth groups from £300 a year to a massive £3,000 a year, which will undoubtedly lead to youth organisations closing down. At a time of rising knife crime and real concerns in the community about what young people do, does my right hon. Friend agree that that is a desperate attack on youth organisations?

Jeremy Wright: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. It is extremely important that youth organisations, particularly the uniformed youth organisations that he describes, have the opportunity to do their important work, which includes helping young people to stay away

from knife crime. How they choose to approach that is, of course, a matter for local authorities, but my hon. Friend will know that the Government have ensured additional funding for uniformed youth organisations which, in our view, is the right thing to do.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, it is great to see you looking so jolly this morning.

Yesterday, I met a young woman who racked up a crippling debt of over £100,000 using nine different credit cards in just two days while gambling online. The operators that took her bets, LeoVegas and Casumo, should be held responsible for their disgraceful conduct. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet the young gambler? Does he agree with me that it is time to ban credit card gambling? No one should go into debt to place a bet.

Jeremy Wright: I have a good deal of sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman says and huge sympathy with those who find themselves in the position of the individual he describes. I will of course meet her. Indeed, I will try to meet others who have been affected by this kind of gambling. It is important that not just gambling companies but all of us take an interest in the way in which this kind of problem gambling is developing. It is very clear that those who are gambling with money they do not have find themselves very quickly in very serious trouble. He will know that the Gambling Commission is at the moment looking at the specific question of gambling on credit. That is a process we have encouraged. I look forward very much to its conclusions. The Government intend to take action on the back of what it says.

T2. [910376] **Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I recall, in bygone years, the fun my father had completing his pools coupon. That stands in stark contrast with the sinister attempts of corporatist, globalist gambling firms to bypass the new restrictions on fixed odds betting terminals. Will the Minister meet me and others to discuss how we can revitalise the football pools, perhaps by cutting duty on this family fun?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): My mum was a big fan of doing the pools, an opportunity many people took. We have rightly taken decisive action. From the start of this month, the FOBT stake has been cut. We have been absolutely clear that harm around gambling is not confined to one product. We will always look at where there is harm and act where we see it. We want responsible business. I will of course meet my right hon. Friend to discuss his concerns.

T3. [910377] **Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with the Foreign Secretary when he said last week:

“Democracy and freedom of expression means nothing unless journalists are able to expose the truth?”

How does that square with the arrest of two members of the National Union of Journalists, Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey, for their role in making the award-winning documentary “No Stone Unturned” which exposes the truth about the police’s protection of the killers involved in the Loughinisland massacre towards the end of the troubles in Northern Ireland?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with what the hon. Lady says. It cannot be more important that journalists in this country and abroad have the opportunity to report what is happening. We have discussed already this morning the question of disinformation, of which there is too much. A large part of the answer to disinformation is good quality, well researched journalism produced by those who are free to do it. We must defend their rights at every opportunity.

T8. [910382] **Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that we must protect our children and young people from the wicked and dark side of social media? The Online Harms White Paper must, without fail, lead to legislation that is wide-ranging, robust and effective.

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I do agree with my hon. Friend. He will have recognised from the White Paper that what we believe will be necessary to provide for a duty of care for online companies, and for an online regulator to enforce it, is primary legislation. I look forward to his support and, I hope, support right across the House for that legislation.

T4. [910378] **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will, I am sure, be aware of the work done by the Industrial Communities Alliance and my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) to demonstrate the disproportionate nature of areas that play the national lottery and areas that subsequently receive lottery funding for community projects. What work is he doing with Camelot to ensure that small towns, small cities and industrial communities feel the benefit of the lottery that they play?

Mims Davies: The national lottery has raised over £39 billion for good causes since 1994, funding projects in every constituency throughout the UK. It is my job, as we move into the fourth licence, to ensure that it thrives for the next 25 years. The opportunity to re-engage with communities and the public is there for us. If there is a particular concern relating to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, I will be happy to take it forward to the national lottery.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps is the Department taking to encourage consortiums of arts organisations to work together with local authorities on applications to the cultural development fund to help local culture’s potential and the visitor economy?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend will know that in relation to the cultural development fund, five local areas will receive a share of £20 million. We believe that that is hugely important for the reasons that she gives. We expect it to create more than 1,300 new jobs across the country and, as she rightly says, to boost tourism and inward investment.

T5. [910379] **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The roll-out of broadband has been patchy to say the least, with some people getting duplication and some getting no coverage at all. What steps will the Government take to ensure that the roll-out of superfast fibre optic broadband does not have the same problems?

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): We published our future telecoms infrastructure review last year and we are now implementing it. We are about to launch the £200 million rural gigabit programme at the end of the month, which will help rural areas. Companies are now vying with one another in competition to secure cities and towns to connect full fibre to premises.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I warmly welcome today's announcement of a youth charter, and the Minister knows that it will get my wholehearted support. Will she confirm the remit of the charter? Will it, for example, have a cross-departmental focus?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he has done to push this forward while in our Department. It is absolutely vital that this works across Government, and this is what we have seen through the Prime Minister's knife crime and serious youth violence summit. It is absolutely right that we make sure that the help for our young people is set out very clearly in the charter and that we listen to people who know what our young people want; that means young people and people working cross-Government in the sector. I will be delighted to work with my hon. Friend on this issue.

T6. [910380] **Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** Over recent weeks, we have seen a number of shocking incidents of racism at football matches at both elite and grassroots levels. What action are the Government taking to ensure that we stamp out racist abuse at every level of the game?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue in the Chamber. There will be a further Government statement this morning on this issue. Football cannot be used as a cloak for racism and intolerance. This is a sign that players, fans, and this Government have had enough—so stop it. It is absolutely right that players can take the right action. We should stand with them, and I look forward to saying more on this later this morning.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): West Oxfordshire District Council does a fantastic job telling the world about the natural wonders of the Oxfordshire Cotswolds. What are Ministers doing to ensure that more tourism investment comes to rural areas such as mine?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): My hon. Friend's constituency and many others are rich in tourism offer. The economy benefits enormously from tourism. Tourism saw its best year ever in the 2017 period and it continues to do extremely well. He and others in similar constituencies promote the rural offer of the beauty of the natural environment across the world and we will continue to do that.

T7. [910381] **Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab):** On the very day that the stake reduction on fixed odds betting terminals was introduced, we discovered that the bookmakers had found a way to bypass that reduction. What promises can the Secretary of State make that the industry will not be allowed to do that in pursuit of further exploitation?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Lady. The actions of those who tried to find a way around the procedures banning the things that we across this House have decided should be banned were disgraceful. What happened thereafter, as she knows, is that the regulator took immediate action and those particular products were withdrawn. I hope that that lesson will be learned by all those across the industry who are tempted to try it again.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I was one of 80 parliamentarians who wrote to the Secretary of State recently to press the case for requiring mobile phone operators to allow roaming across their networks in rural areas. Will he support those calls?

Jeremy Wright: Yes. I am grateful to my hon. Friend and, indeed, to other colleagues who wrote to me. As he knows, my view is very simple: we must get to a place where rural coverage is better than it is. All of us and the mobile network operators have an obligation to achieve that. If it cannot be done any other way, I am perfectly prepared to entertain rural roaming as a way in which it might be done.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State look favourably at the opportunities presented by 5G connectivity on the train line in Devon and Cornwall? If our train journeys are to be long, can he at least help us to make them productive?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. As he knows, mobile coverage on train lines at the moment is based substantially on wi-fi coverage—about 85% of trains now have wi-fi coverage, including, I think, the GWR service from London to Penzance. However, 5G gives us the opportunity to do better. He will be aware of the technical challenges in providing the lineside equipment that we need to make the system work properly. We are investing time and effort with Network Rail to develop that technology in a test-track facility. I hope it will bear fruit.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Tourism and hospitality are vital sectors for Stirling's economy. When can we expect to see a tourism and hospitality sector deal?

Michael Ellis: The tourism sector deal is being closely worked on; it is something we have been working on for some time. It is extremely productive, and the tourism sector itself has been working to make it as productive as possible. It is a reflection of the value of tourism to our economy that it has been given priority in Government over many other sectors, and we are continuing to work on it to produce a result as soon as possible.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As you will know, Mr Speaker, Scotland has made a hugely disproportionate contribution to British tennis, be it the Murrays, Leon Smith or Gordon Reid—I could go on. However, Tennis Scotland has struggled to capitalise on a membership that has doubled in recent years, because Scotland, despite all the success I have just listed, and despite having 8.4% of the UK population, only receives less than 1% of the Lawn Tennis Association's revenue funding. Does the Minister think that that is fair and equitable?

Mims Davies: I had the pleasure recently of sharing a platform with Judy Murray and staff from the new women's sport section of *The Daily Telegraph*. She spoke about the "lady in the van" tennis club that she ran around Scotland to support grassroots tennis. It is absolutely right that the governing body continues to work from the top to support those doing so much from the bottom. I am happy to speak more about that at some point and to support tennis to grow and create more Andy Murrays and, indeed, all Murrays.

Mr Speaker: And, of course, Judy Murray, to her huge credit is promoting the Park of Keir project, which I, for one, and many others, enthusiastically support.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I support anything to do with tennis, Mr Speaker, as you know.

I was heartened to hear the Secretary of State's comments just now about mobile roaming. A recent survey highlighted that a third of all rural buildings have either no mobile coverage or poor coverage. At a time when we are trying to get more small and medium-sized enterprises in rural areas, when we have an increasingly elderly population and when tourism is so important, is it not a disgrace that we should have such a divide between urban and rural? I am sure the Secretary of State understands that we must address that.

Jeremy Wright: I do, and we will.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Food banks are like the fourth emergency service, especially in rural areas such as mine. High Peak Foodbank has helped over 1,000 people this year, but it is no longer funded by the lottery. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the lottery's decision on food banks and the vulnerable people who need them?

Mims Davies: As the lotteries Minister, that is not something I am aware of. I am happy to hear more from the hon. Lady and to engage with the national lottery on this issue. We need to make sure there is appropriate funding, and it is great that the national lottery reaches into many communities, helping people broadly. I am happy to take away this issue and the challenge to look across Government and work with colleagues.

Mr Speaker: Order. We must move on to questions to the Attorney General.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

CPS: Mental Health

1. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to support defendants with mental health issues. [910345]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Crown Prosecution Service has a duty of fairness to all defendants, including people with mental health issues. In March it launched a public consultation on revised guidance for prosecutors dealing with defendants with mental

health issues. It welcomes responses to the consultation to ensure that its published legal guidance gives the best possible help to prosecutors dealing with such cases.

Alex Chalk: A fair trial is one in which the defendant can follow the proceedings and advance his defence, and the CPS, as an administrator of justice, will want to ensure that that remains the case. What steps is it taking to engage with experts to ensure that defendants are best placed to have a fair trial?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend, who has a considerable and distinguished history with regard to the prosecution of serious offences at the Bar, will know that it is vital for experts in the field to be consulted. As part of the consultation, different criminal justice diversions are being considered for some defendants with a range of mental illnesses. I should point out that although autism and other disabilities are included in that consideration, they are not mental illnesses but lifelong conditions. I think that that distinction needs to be drawn very carefully indeed.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I had to intervene with the CPS in the case of a young man in Wakefield who suffered from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. I am happy to say that he has now received the treatment that he needed, and that the CPS was very compassionate. However, research shows that people with ADHD are disproportionately present in the criminal justice system. Will the Solicitor General work with the CPS and experts on the public health White Paper to ensure that young offenders who are disproportionately represented, and who are also likely to have higher reoffending rates, are systematically screened?

The Solicitor General: I welcome the hon. Lady's reference to ADHD. In my professional experience, that condition, connected with communication disorder, is often very prevalent among young offenders in the criminal justice system. As part of the consultation, work will be ongoing to ensure that prosecutors have a greater awareness of the condition when they consider the merits of prosecution.

Sexual Offences

2. **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on ensuring more effective prosecutions of cases involving rape and other sexual offences. [910346]

10. **Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on ensuring more effective prosecutions of cases involving rape and other sexual offences. [910354]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The CPS has undertaken extensive work to ensure that specialist prosecutors are fully equipped to deal with the particular complexities of such cases, and I engage with it regularly about this topic. In March the Government announced a review of how the criminal justice system responds to rape and serious sexual offences. The CPS supports the review, and is committed to working closely with the police and others to address any issues highlighted by it.

Luke Pollard: Is there any guidance for the police or the CPS on access to victims' data? It concerns me that victims of sexual abuse and rape are being subjected to trawls of their personal data—counselling, school and work data—before the CPS considers taking up their cases.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point. A natural and anxious debate is taking place about disclosure, but I can reassure the hon. Gentleman—and, indeed, all complainants and victims of crime—that “reasonable lines of inquiry” does not mean a reckless trawl through the private lives of entirely innocent individuals. That is not a good use of resources, and it is not what we are encouraging. We need a far more targeted line of inquiry, in accordance with both the law and the code of practice.

Thangam Debbonaire: Intimate partners and ex-partners are the largest single category of perpetrators of rape and sexual assault, which, in my experience of working with abusive men, are linked to outdated and, frankly, illegal attitudes to sex in relationships. What discussions is the Solicitor General having with his colleagues in the Department for Education about the content of the curriculum for relationships and sex education in schools?

The Solicitor General: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work that she has done on this issue in the past. She is absolutely right to talk about the input of the Department for Education. I was delighted that the House overwhelmingly passed the new regulations on personal, social, health and economic education, because they deal with relationships properly, and will help young people to understand at an early age what that means and what their responsibilities are. I will continue to have conversations with colleagues in the DFE, and also, importantly, to ensure that the myth-busting that is already being delivered by judges and prosecutors in Crown court trials continues, so that jurors—along with everyone else who is involved in the system—do not have outdated misconceptions about these appalling crimes.

12. [910356] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Millions of people in this country carry smartphones, which collect a huge amount of information on their activities. Will the Government take urgent action to ensure that the criminal justice system gets better at analysing that information? Otherwise, we will see many more collapses of trials.

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. She will be glad to know that, as part of the work that my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General and I have done to publish a new report on disclosure, I will be chairing a tech summit in June to deal precisely with how we can make artificial intelligence work to help with the huge challenge of trawling through that sort of data.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In cases where rape leads to pregnancy, does my hon. and learned Friend agree with the intention behind the 10-minute rule Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) to remove parental rights from fathers of children conceived through rape?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue with me. I regrettably have not had time to consider that Bill, but everyone in the House can agree that those who act criminally and break the law in a serious way should not expect to enjoy the same rights and privileges that the rest of us enjoy.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am one of those who represents a constituency that has had this curse of the wicked grooming, mainly of young girls, by gangs—it has happened in more than a dozen cities and towns in this country. We still have not had an inquiry into the underlying causes and why this happened. The Crown Prosecution Service is under pressure to meet its responsibilities due to the lack of resources.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this deeply concerning issue. I am happy to report that there have been a number of successful prosecutions of gangs who engage in this despicable and criminal behaviour. That is as a result of a change of culture that means the victims of these crimes are taken far more seriously than they were even a few years ago. So there is progress.

Social Media

3. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the effect of social media on the administration of justice. [910347]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The response to the call for evidence on the impact of social media on the administration of justice was published on 5 March this year. We concluded that, whereas at present social media are not having a widespread impact on the trial process, this may not remain the case if the issues identified are not addressed. The Government are responding in a number of ways, including a new gov.uk webpage to support the public in understanding how they can responsibly comment on criminal trials in social media.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Do users, who appear to have an opinion on everything, have any idea what the law actually is?

The Solicitor General: I do sometimes wonder. It should be as plain as a pikestaff to anyone that the criminal trial process has to have integrity and be based on the evidence heard in court. That is why the new contempt online webpage sets out clear and accessible information for the public on what might be considered contempt. I reassure my right hon. Friend that the law officers take robust action where there is evidence of contempt.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the Solicitor General set out what work he is doing with Twitter, Facebook, Google and other online platforms, which is mainly where people take the law into their own hands and assume that they know what they are talking about when they refer to cases and other issues?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. He will be happy to know that I have set up a special point of contact with each of those

social media companies so that if an issue is raised with my office an official can immediately contact a named person to ensure as rapid as possible a takedown of the offending material.

EU Withdrawal: Protection of Human Rights

4. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the protection of human rights in the UK. [910348]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The United Kingdom has a long tradition of ensuring that rights and liberties are protected domestically, and of fulfilling its international human rights obligations. The decision to leave the European Union does not change that.

Alison Thewliss: The Scottish Government set out three principles for human rights protections after Brexit—non-regression from current EU rights, keeping pace with future EU rights developments, and continuing to demonstrate leadership in human rights. Does the Attorney General agree with those principles, and will he share them with his colleagues in Government?

The Attorney General: I find myself in total agreement with what the hon. Lady has said. I will share them with my colleagues. We are not in any way going to permit our departure from the EU to detract from our firm and unshakeable commitment to human rights in this country and to the rule of law.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): In that context, and given the December resolution of the House regarding publication of the Law Officers' opinions, will my right hon. and learned Friend be good enough to tell the House whether his advice was sought on these vital matters of time extensions before critical decisions were taken, as required by the ministerial code? Will he publish that advice?

The Attorney General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the question. He knows that I am acutely conscious of his desire to have the maximum transparency upon the legal advice I give to the Government. He also knows that I am bound by a long-standing convention relating to Law Officers' advice to disclose neither the fact nor the content of it. Within those constraints, I consider constantly to what extent I can make available to the House all the information it needs to take the important decisions that these times require.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Whatever happens with regard to trade, the economy and so on, one of the most important elements in ensuring that we can still secure justice in this country is maintaining some form of extradition with other European Union countries. What will we do if the European arrest warrant is not available to us?

The Attorney General: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government are committed to a close and special relationship with the EU in relation to security. The question of our participation in a system relating to

European arrest warrants will be close to our hearts in the negotiations that are to follow. But if we were not able to avail ourselves of what it is in the interests of both sides to agree, of course we would fall back on the 1957 extradition legislation and its provisions, and the preparations are at an advanced stage, in conjunction with the possibility that still exists of there being no deal between us.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I hope it is not indecent to point out that yesterday's European Council was a humiliation for the Prime Minister. At a time when everyone is crying out for more coppers and school budgets are under tremendous, genuine pressure, how does it make sense to spend £100 million of British taxpayers' money electing 73 Members to the European Parliament to serve for a maximum of five months?

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the right hon. Gentleman is concerned, in the context of his inquiry, with the protection of human rights.

Mr Francois: Including electoral rights.

Mr Speaker: Including electoral rights and possibly the rights of candidates. I feel sure that was implicit in the right hon. Gentleman's inquiry. I am merely rendering it explicit for him.

The Attorney General: To answer the question, as amended, I quite understand my right hon. Friend's frustration. To the outsider, it does not look sensible for us to be holding European elections when the entire country is expecting us to move on, leave the European Union and fulfil the commitments of both major parties at the last general election. However, we are under a legal obligation to do so while we remain a member of the European Union. There is a single, simple answer to this question: let us ratify the withdrawal agreement and we are out.

Leaving the EU

5. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on securing an agreement on the UK leaving the EU. [910349]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): I am extremely grateful for the question. I regularly meet ministerial colleagues to discuss important issues of common interest, including on matters relating to the United Kingdom's exit from the EU. The hon. Lady will understand that I am unable to talk about the legal content of those discussions, but the Government's main priority is to honour the pledges made at the time of the referendum by national politicians of all parties and fulfil its outcome. We can do that by ratifying the withdrawal agreement.

Patricia Gibson: The Attorney General has already set a precedent by publishing his legal advice on the withdrawal agreement, so will he commit to publishing his legal advice to the Government should Labour and the Tories reach an alternative agreement?

The Attorney General: I made it clear to the hon. Lady and to the House that I am acutely conscious of the need for the House to be as fully informed as possible of all legitimate matters that it should know before taking these important decisions. At any significant event in these proceedings, I shall review that need accordingly.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does the Attorney General agree that it is critical that any agreement ensures that our police, prosecution and judicial authorities continue to have uninterrupted access to co-operation and information sharing mechanisms under Eurojust and Europol? That access would be lost in the event of no deal but could be retained in the event of a deal.

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is one of the most important negotiating objectives in connection with our security and law partnership, and it is a matter that we are constantly bringing to the attention of the European Union. If we can ratify the withdrawal agreement, it will be one of the highest priorities.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): During the Attorney General's podcast interview with Nick Robinson last week I was delighted to hear him say that the Government would consider the option of a second European Union referendum, and yesterday the Prime Minister did not rule out that option when questioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), so can the Attorney General tell us what recent discussions the Cabinet have had about a second EU referendum?

The Attorney General: That is a subtle enticement by the hon. and learned Lady, but I know that she knows that I am not going to tell her about what discussions the Cabinet may have had. What I can say, however, is that the current discussions with the Labour Opposition are being pursued in good faith. There are no preconditions and of course we will listen to any suggestions, whether they be about a second referendum or any other matter, to see whether we can find common ground, in the interests of the country, to leave the European Union as swiftly as possible.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Attorney General's recent podcast is clearly quite popular, because I have been listening to it as well, particularly his comments on the legal implications of leaving the European Union. He said that

"we have underestimated its complexity. We are unpicking 45 years of in-depth integration."

Which of his Government colleagues did he have in mind when he made those comments?

The Attorney General: I have been saying this since 2016, as the *Hansard* record will witness, and indeed most recently on 12 March. I take the view that we need to take a complex and careful view of how it is necessary for us to extricate ourselves from 45 years of legal integration. The withdrawal agreement does justice to those complexities. It settles matters at a complex level, and that is precisely why it is necessary for us to leave the European Union. I urge the hon. Gentleman to vote for it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We know that is the Attorney General's view, but I did not detect an answer to my question in all that, so let us try asking about something else the Attorney General has said about Brexit, namely:

"It needs a hard-headed understanding of realities."

When the majority was lost in the snap election, there was no sense of reality when the Prime Minister should have spoken out. The Attorney General was sent on a fruitless pursuit to reopen the withdrawal agreement, which was always impossible, and four months have been spent refusing to accept the reality of not being able to get the withdrawal agreement through this House. Does the Attorney General not agree that it is the failure of the Government to accept reality that has led to the mess we are in?

The Attorney General: No, I do not accept that. The withdrawal agreement was the product of two years of exhaustive negotiation. It settles citizens' rights for millions of British citizens in Europe as well as for EU citizens here. It fulfils the financial obligations to the European Union. It is a complex settlement that requires to be signed before we can leave. I do not accept that it was unrealistic to attempt to get the fruits of that agreement agreed in this House. In truth, as the hon. Gentleman knows, if we are to leave the European Union it is a necessary precondition of our doing so.

East Midlands Rail Franchise

10.44 am

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on why Stagecoach has been disqualified from bidding for the east midlands rail franchise.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): On Wednesday 10 April, it was announced that Abellio is the successful bidder to operate the east midlands rail franchise and will be responsible for delivering new trains, smart ticketing and more frequent services for passengers. Passengers in the east midlands are to get new trains, more peak-time services, reduced journey times and over £17 million of station improvements as Abellio takes over the franchise from August 2019.

Abellio will invest £600 million in trains and stations between August 2019 and 2027, while the Government continue with their £1.5 billion upgrade to the midland main line—the biggest upgrade to the line since it was completed in 1870. This is part of the Government's £48 billion investment to modernise our railways over the next five years.

As we informed the House in yesterday's written statement, Abellio was awarded the contract "following rigorous competition." It was a fair, open competition and Abellio provided the best bid, in which it demonstrated that it will not only meet but exceed the Department's specifications.

Stagecoach chose to put in a non-compliant bid, which resulted in its disqualification, in line with the terms of the published invitation to tender. That said, Stagecoach has played an important role in our railways, and we hope it will continue to do so after the conclusion of the rail review. However, it is entirely for Stagecoach and its bidding partners to explain why it decided to ignore established rules by rejecting the commercial terms on offer.

Mr Betts: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question.

The Minister did not really answer the question. Abellio has been awarded the contract as the best bidder, but the bid of the existing franchisee was not even allowed. Generally, Stagecoach has performed reasonably well on the contract, so will he explain when the requirement was first introduced that a bidder has to cover pension costs? Is this the first franchise for which the requirement has been introduced? Why was it applied?

How much, in total, are the Government trying to cover in costs through the franchising process? When were the bidders notified of the requirement—was it at the beginning of the process?—and why was no one else told about it? Are any other companies refusing to cover such costs? Are any other franchises affected? If they are, what will be the effect on competition within the franchising system? What would happen to future competitions and to the costs that the Government seek to cover if all companies refused to cover those costs?

Finally, on the bid that has been accepted, do these hybrid trains actually exist now? When will they be introduced? What will the Government do if existing

rolling stock is not disability-compliant in 2020? The Government have promised improvements to the timetable, but can we be assured that, at the beginning of the new franchise, journey times will be at least as good, and at least as short, as they were before the botched timetable changes of last year?

Andrew Jones: There are a lot of questions there. First, Stagecoach has acknowledged to the Department that it had bid non-compliantly. We have received offers from other bidders in all competitions that are fully compliant in providing the required pension arrangements for railway workers so, to answer the hon. Gentleman's question on whether this means the bid process is failing and others are refusing, clearly they are not because we have a compliant bid that won in good form.

Stagecoach is an experienced bidder and fully aware of the franchise competition rules, so it is regrettable that it submitted a non-compliant bid that breached the established rules. In doing so, Stagecoach is responsible for its own disqualification. Bidders were invited to bid on the basis of a pension deficit recovery mechanism. They knew that at the very start of the process¹. Stagecoach did not accept it and made some amendments as it submitted the bid. On what would happen if all companies refuse, clearly, by definition, they are not all refusing, so the question does not apply.

We will see an entirely new fleet of trains—a full replacement fleet—come into service. Inter-city services will receive new bi-mode trains, and regional services will receive new diesel trains. The express fleet, which is the Corby-Bedford-London service, will receive new electric trains that offer significantly enhanced environmental improvements.

What is interesting in this franchise is that we will see the first trial of a hydrogen-powered train. [HON. MEMBERS: "When?"] In terms of timing, we will see the new trains coming into service in a phased way. We hope to see the first trains coming in next year, and so on over the next three years.

The bidding process was conducted in a fair and consistent way, applying the rules of engagement equally to all bidders. We have provided feedback to those who have not been successful. The reasons are always commercially confidential. Losing bidders may publicise them if they wish, but we will not do that because they are commercially confidential. The key thing that we are seeing here is a franchise awarded in the typical way that franchises are awarded in our rail industry, delivering passenger benefits.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I am rather surprised at the late withdrawal, or barring, of Stagecoach from this franchise. It seems to have come right at the end, so it is odd that my hon. Friend is saying that somehow Stagecoach knew it was non-compliant, because if the Department knew so early that it was non-compliant, one would have thought it would have been told quite some time ago. These franchise bids are not cheap to make and they are very expensive for the company.

Will my hon. Friend be more specific, as usually is the case, about where the new trains are coming from? If they are to be in operation from next year, presumably an order is about to be made very soon. Where will that

1. [Official Report, 25 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 8MC.]

[*Sir Patrick McLoughlin*]

order come from? I congratulate the Government on widening state ownership of the railways, albeit that of other states.

Andrew Jones: There were a number of points in my right hon. Friend's question. As soon as the decision was taken on this franchise, all the bidders were notified. That is entirely standard. He has a great track record of delivering improvements across our rail network. Bidders were notified, of course, across all competitions, so that they did not incur extra costs. These things are expensive to operate, so this was awarded in a fair and consistent way.

Obviously, the contract to deliver the rolling stock will be between the successful bidder and its rolling stock provider, but we expect to see significant improvement in the rolling stock, and the feedback I have had from passengers along the line and from colleagues who serve along the line is that they are looking forward to seeing the benefits that those will bring.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Clearly, the franchise system is in complete disarray. It seems that Stagecoach boss Martin Griffiths and Richard Branson have been taken completely by surprise by the announcement of the decision to disqualify Stagecoach from the discredited franchise process, seemingly for failing to provide sufficient commitments in terms of the pension scheme, bidders having been asked to bear full long-term funding risks on relevant sections of the railways pension scheme. Can the Minister inform the House about the pension commitments made by Abellio that warranted the award of the east midlands franchise and the extent to which any such commitments were distinct and more acceptable to the Department for Transport?

Is not this really payback for the east coast collapse, two years ago? The question on the airwaves today was whether this decision would propel Richard Branson back into his favourite hobby of suing Her Majesty's Government over the awarding of contracts, which has served him so profitably over the years. What preparations has the Minister's Department made in readiness for potential costly litigation flowing from this decision?

Why did the Department change the pension rules in the middle of the bids? On south eastern, that was only made clear after two rebids. Is not that moving the goalposts?

The real issue is that this Government, by sleight of hand, are trying to reduce their support for the railways pension scheme. They are trying to pass these costs on to the private sector. That is why both Stagecoach and Arriva defaulted on their bids for the east midlands franchise. The rail industry has a plan to reduce the deficits in its pension schemes, yet the Government have ignored that and are attempting to bulldoze through changes without consultation. That is reckless. It will concern rail workers and worsen the rail service for passengers. What discussions were there with the trade unions? Moreover, given that Keith Williams has been instructed to conduct a root-and-branch review of the operation of our railway, why has such a lengthy franchise been awarded before the Williams review reports later this year?

The announcement is accompanied by the decision to extend the franchise award on south eastern to Govia. How can it be right for that company to be given the nod to continue when it has delivered such a miserable service and completely failed its passengers? Is that not further reward for failure? Surely even this beleaguered Government can see what is staring them in the face: the franchise system is in total collapse. They need to respond to long-suffering passengers and do what the next Labour Government will do: bring track and train back together in state ownership—this state.

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman asked a number of questions. Is the franchising system in disarray? Of course it is not. If we look at what has happened to our railways over the past 25 years, we see unprecedented passenger growth. We now have more people travelling on our railways and more services run on our railways, and at a greater level of safety than ever before. The franchising system has been a key ingredient in that delivery. Do I think the franchising system is over? Absolutely not. I think we need to look at how it will evolve in future, and that is what the Williams review is doing. Franchising has helped get the system from A to B, reversing years of decline. We now need to see what system we will have as we take it through to the next stage.

Stagecoach knew that its bid was non-compliant—it acknowledged that to the Department. The hon. Gentleman asked about litigation. The Government are completely confident that the bid was evaluated and decided fairly. It is business as usual in the awarding of a franchise on our rail network. He asked whether the decision on the east coast main line was payback. That question is absolute nonsense. This is an entirely separate matter. The bid was won on merit by the strongest bidder. It offered the best bid, with new trains and more services, including more Sunday services and more early and late services. It was won on merit. If a company chooses to bid non-compliantly, that is its fault.

With regard to passing the costs on to the private sector, that is also nonsense, because these are private sector pension schemes. The rail operating companies have a section of the rail pension scheme. Their trustees will meet the Pensions Regulator to discuss that. Is this a question of the Government seeking to remove responsibility? No, this is a private matter and the trustees will be dealing with that in their own way.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I have met the trade unions. I have met the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and ASLEF, and on this occasion I have written to them to highlight the award today.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Williams said in his recent speech that the franchise system in effect is already broken, and today's announcement proves it. Abellio is hopeless. The Minister will recall an Adjournment debate he had with a number of MPs a couple of months ago—the business of the House had collapsed early so lots of us piled in. I think six or seven Members from Essex, whose constituents suffer that company every day, got up and told him, one after the other, how utterly useless that company is. We have been waiting for years for new trains from Abellio, yet still they do not turn up. It is Dutch-Japanese owned

and it does not give a monkey's about the passengers. I am sorry, but this is a massive mistake and yet another Grayling cock-up.

Andrew Jones: I do not agree with anything my right hon. Friend has just said. That Adjournment debate was very enjoyable; we had many discussions because there were so many interventions. The core of the debate, which was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), was about the introduction of the Delay Repay 15 offer for customers, which went live on 1 April and has been widely welcomed by passengers on the line. Indeed, on 1 April, I went to stations in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, and I met passengers, the Transport Salaried Staffs Association and the rail operating company, and the arrival of DR15 was widely welcomed. The key thing that people were looking for was the consistent delivery of a timetable, so the requirement to pay any form of compensation would not be necessary. That is, of course, at the heart of the Government's CP6—control period 6—investment. We are investing £48 billion over the next five years to modernise and upgrade our railway to make sure that we can deliver the network and services that passengers rightly expect. Is Abellio a failing provider? No.

Mr Francois: Ask my constituents.

Andrew Jones: I have looked at the measures in terms of performance data and customer satisfaction. I recognise that we have had frustrations across our rail network over a number of years and that we had very poor performance last May, but I do not accept that Abellio is a failing performer. It operates 6,000 trains in the UK each day. The service is improving in all areas—*[Interruption.]* My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is doing an awful lot of chuntering using fairly robust language, as he normally does—or as he has taken to doing recently. The point remains that we are delivering a network that is operating at the best that it has operated for a significant number of years. It has turned around decades of under-investment and underperformance. We are now seeing a network carrying more people with a higher level of safety than at any point in British history and this franchise award takes that further.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Yet again, we have not had a statement from the Department for Transport. We have to rely on media announcements and urgent questions to hold the Department to account, but when the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box, he says, "Oh, that's a lot of questions." That is because we are not getting information. Virgin Trains East Coast walked away from the east coast main line owing £2 billion. Many people called for Stagecoach not to be allowed to bid for other franchises, but the Department for Transport dug its heels in, saying that it could bid for franchises and then sat on the non-compliant bid for a long time. Why has the Department adopted such contradictory positions? Martin Griffiths, the Stagecoach chief executive, said:

"We are extremely concerned both at the DfT's decision and its timing. The Department has had full knowledge of these bids for a lengthy period".

Again, what discussions were held on pensions and how long has the Department sat on the non-compliant bid before making a decision?

What will happen with the west coast main line franchise, as we are told by the media that Virgin Trains will disappear in a year? Virgin previously won the 2012 franchise after a legal challenge, so what are the risks of further challenges from Virgin after this decision today, and will the Minister provide any legal advice that the Department has taken?

Abellio in Scotland pays the living wage. Is it part of this franchise award that all employees get the living wage? How robust are the pension protections in this Abellio franchise and how will pensions be protected in other franchises? Clearly, this is now a major issue.

Many of us have called for the Transport Secretary to resign. Now we have the irony of the Transport Secretary threatening the Prime Minister to resign over her position on Europe. Will he follow through on his threat, or will the Government take action and make the Secretary of State resign and shake up the Department?

Andrew Jones: Well, much of that was absolutely ridiculous—just complete nonsense. Let us turn back the page and remind ourselves about the idea that the Government have somehow been dragged to the Dispatch Box. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this was a contract that included a market sensitive element. There are strict procedures when a market-sensitive contract is awarded by any Government—and that includes the Scottish Government. The announcement is made first of all to the City. There was a written ministerial statement at 7 o'clock yesterday morning and by 9 o'clock there was a "Dear Colleague" letter sent out to all those Members who were affected, so what he says is simply wrong.

I have to say I cannot remember exactly the full range of questions the hon. Gentleman asked, but the key thing is that this contract has been awarded in a fair and consistent way. It is delivering significant passenger benefits, including a complete renewal of the fleet. I have already highlighted that the inter-city, regional and express services will all receive new rolling stock—new trains—and that there will be more services, more seats at peak and improved environmental performance. The benefits are clearly very significant. We should welcome them, not the opposite.

I think the hon. Gentleman got carried away with his own rhetoric when he asked whether the Secretary of State should resign. Of course not—what a load of complete nonsense. This franchise was awarded in a fair and consistent way, and it will deliver for passengers. We should celebrate that, not the opposite.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate colleagues, but we have the business question to follow and thereafter another statement, and after that the Prime Minister's statement. There is a premium upon brevity, to be exemplified by single-sentence questions, pioneered by the hon. Gentleman from Bosworth, Mr David Tredinnick—one sentence, man.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. As part of his response to the new franchisee, which will be broadly welcomed in my constituency if it really does produce new trains, better capacity and improved stations—from listening to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois),

[David Tredinnick]

I am not so sure about that—will my hon. Friend look at connectivity between Leicester and Nuneaton via Hinckley? There are also big concerns about the west coast main line.

Andrew Jones: I will of course consider my hon. Friend's point, but we have produced an interactive map so anybody can log on and see where the benefits will fall right across the franchise area. That map is available at maps.dft.gov.uk and may provide the detail he seeks.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I hope the Minister recognises that, although East Midlands Trains staff are covered by TUPE thanks to our membership of the EU, this will be a really uncertain time for them—especially those who have worked for Stagecoach for the last 12 years. Will he first join me in thanking them for their hard work, which I know will continue for the rest of this franchise and into the next? Does he also recognise the wider anxiety that this decision has prompted among railway staff about the security of their pensions? At privatisation, his Department promised to provide a long-term guarantee for their pensions. What assurance can he give them today that that has not changed?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Lady is quite right. I happily join her in thanking those who have worked in this franchise and, indeed, in all the other franchises to make our railway system work day in, day out. It is a hard job they do, and we should recognise that, not criticise them for it.

I also recognise that, when anything changes like this, there will be a degree of uncertainty. A level of uncertainty can come when there are takeovers in any sector of business, but when franchises change there are TUPE protections, which are positive, and I entirely support that. Pensions are a key part of having a comprehensive offer for workers in every sector, and the Pensions Regulator is working with the trustees of the railways pension scheme to ensure that workers' benefits are protected. We want that to happen. We want to see people in the sector retire with secure, stable, good pensions.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is very welcome that we are going to have 80% more seats in the morning peak and new bi-mode trains that can benefit from the electrification to Market Harborough, but may I ask the Minister two things? First, when in the new franchise will those new trains arrive? Secondly, does he agree that if we are going to have new trains for the east midlands, they should be built in the east midlands?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend rightly never misses an opportunity to mention Market Harborough, of which he is a great champion. Obviously, the contract for the new trains will be placed by the new bidder, but I am always keen to see more manufacturing take place in this country. That is why we have been working to make the environment for manufacturing in this country so much better, which is one of the ingredients of the economic turnaround from the mess this Government inherited.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on securing this very important question. A large number of people across the east midlands will share his concerns about the granting of this franchise. Stagecoach at least backed the Access for All bid for Beeston station, and it is really unfortunate that the Government have not provided the money to make sure that we have that funding.

There is real concern about rolling stock and Abellio's ability to provide it. In short, the Minister should know that Stagecoach certainly told me that there would be no new rolling stock. As he will know, we have on this line trains that are 40 years old. There will be no new trains for at least three years. We now need to firm this up. Will he confirm that Abellio will not provide trains for at least four years, or is there any chance that it might be a shorter period?

Andrew Jones: I recognise that the east midlands franchise has been successful. However, this bid was won on merit and awarded to the strongest bidder. It was the strongest bidder irrespective of any of the compliance issues that we have been talking about today.

As regards the Access for All bid for Beeston, it was not successful in this round. I imagine that we will see further rounds of Access for All funding because it is a critical part of this. We are working to make our railway network available for as many people as possible. There is no greater champion for that than the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), who is sitting next to me. I therefore suggest that the right hon. Lady speaks to her to discuss potential future bids for Beeston.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I welcome any opportunity to improve the service through the east midlands and to get new trains. I echo the calls for those trains to be made in Derby if at all possible. Will the Minister confirm that the new contract includes a requirement for the new franchisee to bring forward a business case for the Robin Hood line extension through my constituency, for which we have been fighting for many years and will be a big step forward for my constituents?

Andrew Jones: I receive quite a number of lobbies on the Robin Hood line. I cannot provide the immediate reassurance that my hon. Friend is looking for, but I suggest that we could perhaps meet to discuss this further. I am aware that it will be of interest to many colleagues within the House.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Public Accounts Committee has repeatedly highlighted the problems with the franchising system, and the fact that we were whittled down to a single bidder underlines that. I thank the Minister's Department for sending me details of the franchise. The interesting point is the extension of the Govia contract, which will go on until November of this year, with an option to extend the agreement, the Secretary of State tells me, to April 2020. Does this mean that the outcome of the root-and-branch rail review will be so conclusive that he will have the time to run a new franchising project within six months?

Andrew Jones: I think that the hon. Lady is referring to the south eastern franchise.

Meg Hillier *indicated assent.*

Andrew Jones: Right. Well, that franchise is still under consideration and we will be announcing the results in due course. The point in the letter to the hon. Lady was that while that evaluation is taking place, there has been a short extension to the existing franchise to ensure that passenger services can continue to operate.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The main concerns of Kettering rail users are finding a seat on crowded peak time trains to and from London, the low frequency of services north on the main line to Leicester and the level of fares per mile being among the highest in the country. Does the winning bidder address any of those issues?

Andrew Jones: Yes, it does, because it puts more capacity into the franchise so that many more of the constituents my hon. Friend serves so well will be able to secure the seats they are looking for.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): When does the Minister expect the new hydrogen-driven trains promised in his statement to run?

Andrew Jones: This is the very earliest of stages, so I am afraid I cannot provide all the details on that. However, I am extremely keen to see further environmental improvements on our rail network, and it is with great relish that I will be taking the first opportunity to bring a hydrogen-powered train on to the network.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The Minister paints a very glowing picture of this new franchise—it almost sounds too good to be true. As somebody who will be travelling on these trains every week, as he will not be, can he assure me that the quality of the brand-new trains that he has promised us, which will apparently be amazing, will be at least as good as the ones we have now and better than Abellio usually has, or will they be of inferior quality? When will they come into the franchise, and will they be stopping more frequently between London and Belper?

Andrew Jones: The quality of the rolling stock will be upgraded. The rolling stock in this area is indeed quite old. I am fully aware that I do not travel on the line as frequently as my hon. Friend, although I am quite a regular passenger. As we replace trains across our network, we are seeing a much improved service. In this instance, there will be more seats and free wi-fi across the franchise, which should benefit her and those she serves. On stopping at Belper, I will need to do some further investigation and reply separately on that point.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The franchise system is broken. It does not work for staff or in the interests of passengers. The potential for a direct line between Grimsby and London was scuppered by alleged anti-competitiveness between franchisees. Does not the process need a complete overhaul?

Andrew Jones: I have already said how I think that franchising has been a key part of the turnaround in our rail network since privatisation. On services to Grimsby, a new Nottingham to Grimsby service, with limited extension to Cleethorpes, is part of the new franchise, and the hon. Lady should welcome it.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What is the point of asking Keith Williams to conduct a root-and-branch review of the railways while at the same time awarding a very long franchise?

Andrew Jones: To make sure that we get the benefits to passengers as fast as possible.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): After a 10-year campaign for station improvement, local residents in Kidsgrove finally secured funding under Access for All for an accessible bridge and an extended car park. Problems with Network Rail have delayed the project, meaning that the car park is now delayed. The car park programme is overseen by East Midlands Trains and will go over the franchise date. Can the Minister assure me that the change in franchise will not affect my car park?

Andrew Jones: I am keen to see the Access for All benefits implemented across the network as soon as possible. The detail of that question has been heard by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden, and she will make contact with the hon. Lady to discuss that issue further.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am really disappointed that the Secretary of State, who was in his place on the Front Bench earlier, was not able to take the urgent question, because franchising is one of the key planks of the Government's railway policy. It seems to me that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) said, it is failing passengers. Now an award to 2027 has been made, at the same time as the Williams review. How can that possibly make sense?

Andrew Jones: The diary of the Secretary of State is not relevant to this point. We have got a bid that delivers more seats, more capacity, more services, reduced journey times and a new fleet of rolling stock. This is not something that is failing: it is a positive thing and the hon. Lady should welcome it.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Yesterday the Department for Transport announced it has granted the south eastern rail franchise yet another extension. This is the fourth time that has been delayed. It is preventing investment and improvement for passengers. Does the Minister acknowledge that the delay is failing long-suffering passengers who rely on this service?

Andrew Jones: I will agree that franchising is one of the best ways to deliver passenger service improvements and new rolling stock, so we agree strongly on that. The hon. Lady might wish to speak with her Front Bench. In terms of the delay on south eastern, it is a complex matter and it is still being evaluated. We will make the decision as soon as possible.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not correct that the franchise system is a fundamentally flawed business model? Over the past 10 years, we have

[Mr Paul Sweeney]

seen £3.5 billion extracted in dividends—money creamed off our railways that could have been reinvested had we had a proper model of public ownership and democratic accountability in our railway system. Indeed, Virgin Trains alone has extracted £53 million in the last year. It is a thoroughly inefficient system that needs to be corrected, and that includes ScotRail too.

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. He talks about the dividends that are paid, but he fails to remember one important point, which is the amount of investment brought in from the private sector through the franchising process. That has totalled £10 billion. Would the Labour party take that from taxation or other spending areas? Where will that money be found if we do not bring in private sector investment? Those are great questions which the Labour party is not addressing in its ill-thought-through, uncosted attempts at nationalisation.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The east coast decision is inextricably linked to the west coast decision, which is forthcoming in June and causing great uncertainty for Virgin rail users in north Wales, the north-west of England and north to Scotland. Can the Minister give an assurance that any concerns raised about the east coast franchise will be reflected on before the west coast franchise is awarded?

Andrew Jones: The bids for the west coast franchise will be assessed and the franchise awarded in the normal way. I am slightly puzzled by the Labour party's position on this. After the east coast main line affair last year, Labour was broadly suggesting that Stagecoach should not be allowed to bid for anything; now it is broadly suggesting that it is bad to take away any franchises from it.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Can the Minister clarify the situation with Virgin on the west coast main line? And I do not want a lecture about the Labour party's stance; I want a straight answer.

Andrew Jones: The answer is quite straightforward. Stagecoach bid for the east midlands franchise, it was not compliant and, as part of the feedback that it received, was told that it was not compliant, which it knew, on the other bids as well.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The rail industry, through the Rail Delivery Group and with the support of the trade unions, wrote to the Government some weeks ago with alternative proposals to deal with the issues around the pension scheme. Will the Minister tell us his response to those proposals and say whether they were considered in this important decision?

Andrew Jones: I received a letter last week from the rail industry on that matter. That is still being considered and we will respond in due course, but that is not part of this award. The franchise has been awarded on merit to the strongest bidder, and we should be looking forward to the passenger benefits that will flow from that award.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that Abellio runs part of the London Northwestern Railway, which replaced London Midland. It is now reducing its timetable arrangements, so what comfort can my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent have that the east midlands train franchise, whose services run all the way from Nottingham to Crewe through the great towns and cities of Staffordshire, will not later be subject to the same reduction in services because Abellio was the only bidder and there is no alternative?

Andrew Jones: I will look in detail at the points that the hon. Gentleman makes, but our objective is to run more services. That is the key thing that is happening right across our network. We are running more services and carrying more passengers, and with a record level of safety, than at any point in British history, so to suggest that franchising has been a failure is a complete misunderstanding. I will of course look at his points and get back to him to discuss them further.

Business of the House

11.23 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Subject to the House agreeing item 1 on the Order Paper, I can confirm that the House will rise at the close of business today and return on Tuesday 23 April.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Just stop there.

Andrea Leadsom: Okay. [*Laughter.*]

The business for week commencing 22 April will be:
MONDAY 22 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 23 APRIL—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Northern Ireland (Extension of Period for Executive Formation) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Value Added Tax (Tour Operators) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Electronic Communications (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Animal Health, Seed Potatoes and Food (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.

WEDNESDAY 24 APRIL—Opposition day (unallotted day). There will be a debate on an opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

Hon. Members: Hooray!

Chris Bryant: Resign!

Andrea Leadsom: No.

THURSDAY 25 APRIL—Debate on a motion relating to school funding followed by debate on a motion relating to restrictive intervention of children and young people. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 26 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

Following the decision taken yesterday to extend article 50 to 31 October, I confirm that subject to the agreement of the House, the House will rise at the close of business today and return on Tuesday 23 April.

More people than ever are watching what is going on in Parliament, and we now have evidence for that. In March, the number of unique viewers on the Parliament Live website exceeded 1 million in a month for the first time. To put that into perspective, the average number of unique views during 2019 has been around 300,000 a month. We might be facing a very challenging time in Parliament, but the silver lining is that huge increase in democratic participation.

I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) on his private Member's Bill having achieved Royal Assent. Finn's law will help to protect our much-loved service animals.

Finally, I welcome the new hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones). Her predecessor was much admired, and he was a keen attendee of business questions. I look

forward to her contributions in the Chamber. I wish all Members of the House, their staff and all House staff a very relaxing break and a happy Easter.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the Opposition day debate—I was going to point out that it is 150 days since we last had one, so I thank her for that. Will she supply us with a new list of ministerial responsibilities, as there have been a number of resignations and appointments?

I do not know whether the Leader of the House wishes to correct the record. She said that a no-deal Brexit would not be nearly as bad as many would like to think. Did she receive the 14-page memo from the Cabinet Secretary and head of the civil service, Sir Mark Sedwill, who said that a no-deal scenario would be catastrophic for the country? Luckily we are not going down that route. She also said that all the Prime Minister had to do was persuade the German Chancellor to re-open the withdrawal agreement and remove the Irish backstop, and then a deal could be secured. However, a spokesperson for No. 10 said that the EU was clear that that was not going to be possible. Can the Leader of the House confirm what exactly is Government policy?

On Monday, the Leader of the House made a business statement about the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 5) Bill, yet she did not vote with her colleagues. I was warmly welcomed by both the Government and the Opposition Chief Whips, but the absentees included the Leader of the House, the Attorney General, the Secretary of State for International Trade, and the Secretary of State for Transport. Was the Leader of the House at an alternative Cabinet meeting, and was the Prime Minister invited to that alt-Cab?

I am pleased that the Leader of the House set out a number of statutory instruments for consideration, but could I ask for some more motions to be debated on the Floor of the House? For example, the Opposition have tabled early-day motion 2190 on higher education.

[*That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Higher Education (Registration Fees) (England) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 543), dated 11 March 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 12 March 2019, be annulled.*]

It seeks to annul statutory instrument 543, which sets out the fees for higher education providers. Universities UK has concerns about those fee increases, and as the SI came into force on 6 April 2019, it is still within the praying period. The European Statutory Instruments Committee disagreed with the Government and recommended that the European University Institute regulations should be debated on the Floor of the House. Those regulations enable our withdrawal from the European University Institute, of which we have been a member since 1976. Academics are up in arms about the fact that we have to withdraw from it.

I have raised previously the Non-contentious Probate (Fees) Order 2018, which is actually very contentious and is found under Future Business B. Can the Leader of the House assure us that there will be a debate on the Floor of the House, and that it will not be pushed through by the Government? Mr Speaker, yesterday you granted an urgent question to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on voter ID pilots. Can the Leader of the House confirm

[Valerie Vaz]

that every study that has been applied for will come to the House for debate as it is important to have that parliamentary scrutiny?

Last week we were—quite rightly—concerned about the gender pay gap. When will the Government tackle the huge differentials in the pay system between executive and employee pay? The managing director of Waterstones, James Daunt, is paid a salary of £1.6 million, while nearly 1,900 of his employees do not even receive the real living wage. The chief executive officer of Centrica, which owns British Gas, is paid 72 times the salary of an employee in the lower quartile of its salary range. The people at the base of the pyramid are the wealth creators. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), recommends that the Government send a strong signal on pay reform by giving the regulator the powers and remit to ensure the highest standards of engagement with shareholders and other stakeholders, particularly employees.

For the first time, Parliament will not be sitting to wish my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) a happy birthday, which falls on Easter Sunday. I also want to send the wishes of the whole House to our gracious sovereign, who will also have a birthday on that day. She said:

“over the years I have observed that some attributes of leadership are universal and are often about finding ways of encouraging people to combine their efforts, their talents, their insights, their enthusiasm and their inspiration to work together.”

This week we all celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. I pay tribute to John Hume, who won the Nobel peace prize, the Martin Luther King prize and the Ghandi peace prize for starting the peace process. You will recall, Mr Speaker, that the agreement was put to the people of Ireland in a confirmatory vote. Given the divisions at this time in our country, the words of John Hume are important. He said:

“Difference is the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth and it should therefore never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace: respect for diversity.”

I, too, welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) to this place and we look forward to her maiden speech. If her acceptance speech when she won the seat is anything to go by, it will be absolutely fantastic, as will be her contribution to this House.

I welcome Sarah Davies as the new Clerk Assistant. To Sarah there is no such thing as a stupid question. I thank Liam Laurence Smyth and Paul Evans. As the Clerk of the House said, they have covered many jobs to make the work of this House seamless.

Mr Speaker, you are an internet sensation. Apparently in Europe they think you can only say four words—order, order, ayes and noes—but they do like you. I thank you, the Deputy Speakers and your office for their unfailing courtesy and kindness. I also thank: the Serjeant at Arms for all his work; Phil and his team of Doorkeepers; the House of Commons Library; the Official Reporters; the Vote Office, who have had to work overtime to print amendments; the catering and cleaning staff; the postal workers; the police officers; and all the security officers

on the estate. Our staff and the staff of all the political parties are unseen, but they have worked incredibly hard. Mr Speaker, not a single person has complained about working extra time to enable us to do our work. We thank them all. I wish everyone a happy and peaceful Easter.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. I join her in wishing the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee a very happy birthday for Easter Sunday. Yesterday, I had the huge pleasure of attending Privy Council at Windsor castle. I can tell the House that Her Majesty is in excellent form. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her personal tribute to the Queen.

The hon. Lady asks for an update on ministerial responsibilities. She knows that that will be provided as soon as it can be done.

The hon. Lady asks about the Prime Minister's policy on Brexit. She will be aware that the Prime Minister made a statement yesterday, in which she said:

“The UK should have left the EU by now and I sincerely regret the fact that I have not yet been able to persuade Parliament to approve a deal which would allow the UK to leave in a smooth and orderly way.”

She went on to add:

“we have a duty as politicians to find a way to fulfil the democratic decision of the referendum, deliver Brexit and move our country forward.”

I totally agree with the Prime Minister.

The hon. Lady asks about certain negative procedure statutory instruments. It is, of course, a matter of parliamentary convention that, where a reasonable request for a debate has been made, time should be allowed for that debate. I think we have demonstrated in this Session that the Government have been willing to provide time in line with the convention to accede to reasonable requests. I encourage her to raise her request through the usual channels.

The hon. Lady raised particular questions about ID pilots and the gender pay gap. She will be aware that we have had urgent questions on both those issues in the last week, so I hope that they answered her questions. She talked about inequality. She should celebrate, as we all should, that the employment rate is at a record high; that we have the lowest unemployment since the 1970s; that over 4 million of the lowest earners were taken out of income tax altogether between 2010 and 2015; and that, importantly, the top 5% of earners are paying half of all income tax. That is absolutely vital; those with the broadest shoulders are carrying the heaviest burden.

Finally, I join the hon. Lady in celebrating the 21st anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which has been so important in ensuring peace in Northern Ireland.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): While I regret that there is no Easter Adjournment debate, will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the sacrifices that animals have made with their lives for human beings throughout the ages? Over 1 million horses lost their lives in the first world war and every day, sniffer dogs come into this House to ensure that there is not another gunpowder plot. I am delighted that tomorrow in Essex, a memorial will be unveiled to commemorate the sacrifices that police sniffer dogs have made with their lives.

Andrea Leadsom: I know that all hon. Members always look forward to my hon. Friend's contributions to pre-recess Adjournment debates. I am sure that Mr Speaker would look very favourably on his desire for a specific Adjournment debate to address the sacrifice that animals have made in the service of our country. I say again that we should all celebrate the Royal Assent that was achieved last week for the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019—Finn's law—which will help to protect our service animals.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for at least giving us the second part of our Easter break.

We really could not make it up: of all the dates to kick the Brexit can down the road to, Halloween could not be a more appropriate destination. Can we therefore have a debate about something that this House is now supremely experienced in: horror and ghouls? That is the date that this House of horrors will eventually meet its Brexit afterlife, and if that is not frightening enough, there is nothing in store for us other than more torment, purgatory and trick or treat, with a special emphasis on trick.

When watching the scenes from yesterday, it must have seemed to so many of my colleagues on the Government side to be the ultimate humiliation and the real horror. Their Prime Minister was sitting in an anteroom waiting to hear what the EU were prepared to grant the UK. After telling us that we would be out of the EU by the 29th of last month, after saying that there would be no extension, and after trying to secure a short extension, they are now obliged to contest the European parliamentary elections, in which they will undoubtedly be gubbed. If that is taking back control, can we not just go back to the good old days when we were just a bog-standard vassal state?

We have been warned that the House should not waste the time that the EU has so generously granted us. Can the Leader of the House detail how the time will be used much more productively and convince us that there will not be just more of the same repetitive and ultimately doomed agenda; no more of this "My way or the highway"; no more not listening; and no more not compromising? Will there be a real attempt to work right across the House and engage with all parts of the UK to show that the Government are at least prepared to listen to others?

Lastly, I very much welcome the new hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones)—she is more than welcome in this House—and I congratulate Sarah Davies on her new appointment to Clerk Assistant. I also take this opportunity to thank the staff of the House, including the police and all those who look after us. It must be difficult to work in a House dominated by chaos, indecision and confusion, when arrangements are changed at the last possible minute, but they have dealt with it stoically and without any complaints. I wish them the very best for the week that they will have for the Easter break.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman talks about Halloween, ghosts, ghouls and horrors, but the real horror is that we as a Parliament have not yet delivered on what we were expressly told to do in 2016, which is to leave the European Union. That is what we will be spending the next few months seeking to do.

The hon. Gentleman says that that means that we need to consult. He knows full well that the Prime Minister is indeed consulting, and has been for many months, with Opposition Members across the House. However, I would remind him of the words of his colleague the constitutional Minister in the Scottish Parliament who was asked by a Select Committee whether, if there were a second referendum, which I gather is SNP policy, and the United Kingdom were to decide again to leave, he would abide by that. The answer? No. The truth of the matter is that it is the hon. Gentleman and the Scottish nationalists who do not want to listen to the will of the people and who do not respect the will of the people.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Given that the Leader of the House has just made an announcement regarding our going into recess, I am surprised that she has not told the House whether the Government intend to lay today the statutory instrument that is required to implement what is regarded as the unlawful agreement made last night extending the time when we will leave the EU, and that is now, disgracefully, under a negative, rather than an affirmative, resolution. Could she please explain to the House what is going on?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that, since the Prime Minister has agreed an extension of article 50 until 31 October at the latest, that is now set in international law. The EU has agreed that the extension can be terminated when the withdrawal agreement has been ratified, so we now need to reflect this change on our domestic statute book. Following the amendments made by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019, the statutory instrument needed to redefine exit day is now subject to the negative procedure.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader and the shadow Leader of the House for their birthday wishes, although my birthday is not for a week and a bit yet—I was born on Easter Sunday, and it comes round every now and again. I also wish a very happy birthday for tomorrow to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern)—I think she will be catching up with me quite soon.

I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Backbench Business on Thursday 25 April—they are very important debates, which we have been waiting some time to hear while they have been in the queue.

I think this has been circulated, but the debate on Islamophobia, which was scheduled for this afternoon, is to be withdrawn so that time is given to the conclusion of the debate on the 2019 loan charge and we can get that all-important ministerial response.

We are coming back on Tuesday 23 April, and I understand that we will be sitting in this Chamber on Monday hours. Can we make sure that Westminster Hall is in a similar vein, because it is unfair for Members travelling from further afield to be expected to attend Westminster Hall on Tuesday hours when this Chamber is meeting on Monday hours?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Westminster Hall will be sitting Monday hours on the Tuesday, alongside this Chamber.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

I sincerely regret that, owing to the pressures of the very important business today, the hon. Gentleman has found it necessary, quite rightly, to move the date of the debate on Islamophobia. I just want to say again from the Dispatch Box that nobody should ever fear persecution of their faith. It is vital that we all stand together to reject those who seek to spread hatred and to divide us. I want to assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are doing everything they can to tackle hate and extremism.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for her comments about the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019. I notice that one or two of my co-sponsors are here in the Chamber, and I would like to thank them and Members in all parts for their support. During proceedings on the Bill, the Government consulted on increasing the sentence for offences under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to five years. Will legislation come forward in the week commencing 23 April, or shortly, so that that important measure can be introduced to protect all animals?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. and learned Friend raises a really important point. He will know, and will no doubt be proud of the fact, as all hon. Members should be, that animal welfare standards in the United Kingdom are rightly among the highest in the world. The Government have sought to do as much as they can to further protect animals, including through some of the measures to prevent illegal puppy trading and so on. The Government will always continue to do all they can to increase animal welfare standards, including by bringing in measures to increase the possibility of sentencing as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I am privileged to be able to speak in this Chamber as the new Member of Parliament for Newport West.

County lines is a growing issue across the UK, and no more so than in my constituency. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss the way in which it is damaging our communities?

Andrea Leadsom: Let me again welcome the hon. Lady, and congratulate her on her delivery of an excellent question. She will no doubt be aware that the subject she has raised is of huge concern to Members in all parts of the House, and that the Government have taken significant steps to try to resolve the appalling issue of county lines, which involves drug dealing, the abuse of young people—many of whom are being tackled violently—and the increased incidence of knife crime. It is an appalling problem.

The hon. Lady may also be aware that the Government have set up a serious violence taskforce and a consultation on treating serious violence as a public health emergency. The police are making efforts to tackle the county lines problem and, specifically, gang membership. They are trying to catch gang leaders and intervene earlier to take young people away from a life that leads to serious violence, knife crime and county lines.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Tilly Green is an 11-year-old who lives in Bradfield, in my constituency. She suffers from cystic fibrosis and would benefit from the use of a drug called Orkambi, but unfortunately the

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence does not allow it to be used. I am consulting Ministers about the matter, but it would be a great help if there were the possibility of a debate in the House to draw out the relatively opaque nature of how NICE decides whether a drug can or cannot be used. Knowing that the treatment would be available in due course would bring great comfort to families like Tilly's.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. There are two children with cystic fibrosis in my own constituency, and they and their parents are also campaigning strongly for access to Orkambi. There have been a number of meetings in Parliament between Members and Vertex, the supplier of the drug, to try to move things forward. The Government are doing everything they can to find a way through the problem, but I encourage my hon. Friend and others to keep on fighting for access to this drug.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Last September my constituent Jacqueline Wileman was hit and killed by a lorry that had been stolen by four men in Barnsley. Three of them were on probation, all four had nearly 100 criminal convictions between them, and one had already been convicted of causing death by dangerous driving. They all received prison sentences of just 13 years or less, including the man who had been driving, who could be released within four years. Will the Government make time available for an urgent debate on removing the 14-year maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving? No other family should have to go through what Jackie's have been through.

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear that. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise it in the Chamber. It is appalling when something as terrible as a death happens, perpetrated by people who already have offences against their names. It appears that the sentences received by those people were too lenient, which must be absolutely terrible for the family of the person who was killed. Justice questions will take place on our first day back, 23 April, and I encourage the hon. Lady to raise the issue directly with Ministers then.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May we have an urgent debate about the action that is needed to deal with the theft of tools? I hope that the Leader of the House shares my horror at this particularly pernicious crime. Someone who steals a self-employed tradesperson's tools steals their livelihood, and many of those people cannot claim on their insurance. This is a serious issue, and we need to deal with it.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised a very important point. I think that we all understand the distress and disruption caused by this type of crime and the effect that it has on victims, particularly when they rely on the tools of their trade to earn a living. It is absolutely clear that all this type of crime should be reported to the police so that it can be properly investigated. It is, of course, for chief constables and police and crime commissioners to decide how best to deploy resources to manage and respond to individual crimes.

In my constituency we recently had a successful operation that resulted in the return of many stolen tools as a result of good police intelligence and good reporting by the victims.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May we have a statement or an urgent debate on the UNICEF campaign to protect children from deadly toxic air? It is a subject on which I have received a number of representations from the children of Cullivoe Primary School in Yell, who take the view very reasonably that everyone should be entitled to air that is as clean as Shetland air, even if they might not necessarily want it to move at the same speed as ours occasionally does.

Andrea Leadsom: I will take that as an invitation from the right hon. Gentleman to come to Shetland. He is right of course; we have to do all we can to ensure that not just children but all of us are able to breathe clean air. That is absolutely vital. He will be aware that air pollution has declined significantly since 2010. Emissions of toxic nitrogen oxides have fallen by 29% and are at their lowest since records began. But the Government are committed to ensuring that, where people live, and where NO₂ levels are at their worst, we do all that we can. We have announced our world-leading new clean air strategy to try to clean up air, and we are spending £3.5 billion on it to try to reduce harmful emissions.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): A number of NHS clinicians have quit the gender identity development service clinic over ethical and safety concerns. They state that they were

“often under pressure to refer young people for life-altering treatment even though they did not believe that it was in the individual’s best clinical interests. ... It feels like conversion therapy for gay children.”

They fear that homophobia is driving a surge in transgender young people. They say that

“experimental treatment is being done on children who have experienced mental health difficulties, abuse and family trauma.”

I know, having spoken to her, that the Minister responsible, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), would welcome the opportunity to make a statement, and I hope that the Leader of the House will facilitate that. We are driving too many young people down a road to a destination from which they will never return.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly sensitive topic. We want to make the legal gender recognition process less intrusive and bureaucratic for transgender people. Being trans is not an illness and it should not be treated as though it is. That is why we held our consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004. It is a sensitive topic, and it is important to hear all views on it, including those of some young people perhaps being pushed to make decisions too early. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities is determined to ensure that we get this right.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we debate the power of science? Astronomers have achieved an accurate image of a black hole, which is a region in space-time with a gravitational pull so strong that nothing can escape from it. May I suggest that the Government ask the astronomers to point their telescopes next at planet Brexit so that we can reveal that there is a means of escape by holding a confirmatory referendum?

Andrea Leadsom: Well of course, many of us in this place saw our first black hole when we came into office in 2010 and saw the state of the finances that Labour

had left for the United Kingdom, so we have already had our own bit of experience. On a more general point, the hon. Gentleman is right to raise this extraordinary scientific progress, and he will be pleased to know that the UK scores the highest of all countries for having the most highly cited papers in astronomy, physics, Earth observation and planetary science. We remain a leading member of the European Space Agency, which is independent of the EU and allows UK scientists to collaborate with international partners on pioneering space science missions. The UK space sector is growing; it is worth a total of £14.8 billion and employs almost 50,000 people in the UK.

Chris Bryant: You enjoyed that, didn’t you?

Andrea Leadsom: I did.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Residents in Reston in my constituency have fought hard for many years to bring east coast main line rail services back to their community. Despite a promise by the SNP Scottish Government that the station would be reopened by 2016, this has still not happened because of dither and delay by the SNP Administration in Edinburgh. May we have a debate about how Network Rail interacts with the Scottish Government to ensure that Reston station and other rail projects across Scotland are delivered more quickly?

Andrea Leadsom: It is interesting how the Scottish nationalists opposite are trying to shut my hon. Friend down—obviously because this is a devolved matter. He rightly raises a frustrating issue. A number of colleagues have raised concerns about trains, stations and network projects in their constituencies. I am sure that a debate on those matters would be very welcome. He might want to speak to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), so that all hon. Members can share their concerns.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): At Foxhill Primary School, which I visited last week, a reduction in funding has forced it to consider cutting parts of its arts programme despite having an amazing brass band and choir. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of arts and creativity in the school curriculum?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the schools in her constituency who are doing a great deal to try to ensure that culture and the arts are alive and well—and music in particular, which many children enjoy so much at a young age; some continue with it. She is right that schools need to protect as wide a curriculum as possible, and she will be aware that this year there is more than £43 billion of core funding for schools—the highest figure ever—and 1.9 million more children are being educated in “good” and “outstanding” schools than in 2010. The Government are committed to allowing headteachers the flexibility to provide the kind of education that young people deserve to receive.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This Sunday sees the Hindu festival of Rama Navami, which celebrates not only the birth of lord Rama but his betrothal to his consort, Sita. This is a time of great joy for Hindus and the deities will be paraded all around the country.

[Bob Blackman]

Will my right hon. Friend arrange for a debate in Government time on the joys of marriage and the opportunity once again to celebrate the triumph of good over evil?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend often raises these important occasions on behalf of his constituents, and he is absolutely right to do so. I extend warm wishes to all those celebrating the occasion of the birth of lord Rama. Rama Navami also marks the start of spring, and we are reminded of the hope that this time of year brings for growth and happiness.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): On Monday evening a man was rammed off his motorbike, stabbed and had his motorbike stolen. He is in a critical condition in hospital. The week before, a young man was stabbed at half-past 3 in the afternoon. Fortunately, he is not in a critical condition. May we have a debate in Government time about the impact of a cut of 21,000 police officers on the police's ability to apprehend the people carrying out these atrocious crimes?

Andrea Leadsom: May I say to the hon. Gentleman how sorry I am to hear about these appalling crimes? It is totally unacceptable, and our hearts go out to the victims.

In the spring statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an extra £100 million in the short term to allow police and crime commissioners to allocate more resources to tackling knife crime. Importantly, we have introduced the Offensive Weapons Bill, which includes a new knife crime prevention order that will give police more powers to stop people carrying knives and prevent young people from accessing knives online. We have extended stop-and-search powers, and under Operation Sceptre police forces are undertaking co-ordinated national weeks of action to tackle knife crime. The Government are taking a huge number of steps in collaboration with local police forces to try to get a grip on the appalling rise in knife crime.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Aberdeen International airport is essential to the engine room of the Scottish economy, the oil and gas capital of the UK. There has been a serious reduction in the number of flights, which is inconveniencing the business community, leisure travellers and six MPs, including several who sit across the Floor. Will my right hon. Friend consider finding time for a debate on regional connectivity?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear that from my hon. Friend. Obviously, we rely on our regional airports, and it is absolutely vital that they continue to offer a good service. I am not sure whether the Aberdeen city region deal will offer any route forward, with new investment coming into the area, but I encourage my hon. Friend to raise his particular issue directly with Ministers at Transport questions.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We have learned that 4 million older people live in poverty, nearly 1 million live in severe poverty and 46,000 died prematurely last year. Can we have an urgent debate to

discuss what is happening to older people in our country and their rights, and a commission to uphold those rights?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a really important point. It is vital that we do everything we can to ensure that our older population are living in comfort. That is why the Government introduced the triple lock on the basic state pension. We have renewed that commitment, guaranteeing that pensions will rise for each year of this Parliament by the highest of average earnings growth, price inflation or 2.5%. That means that the basic state pension is now more than £1,450 a year higher than it was in 2010. This Government are determined to ensure that our older people have the right level of state support.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Following on from my right hon. Friend's answer, when might we have a debate on early-day motion 2265?

[That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 552), dated 12 March 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 18 March 2019, be annulled.]

Why are 500,000 British pensioners still denied increases 17 years after Judge Stanley Burnton declared that Government policy was not consistent or coherent? It seems time that we take our responsibilities to those pensioners as seriously as we take our responsibilities to others. Why do they get the increase in Jamaica but not Trinidad, in the United States but not Canada, and in the Philippines but not Indonesia? It is crazy.

Andrea Leadsom: I assume my hon. Friend is talking about overseas pensioners—he was not clear. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his question directly with Ministers. He will be aware that there have been different arrangements over many years. Of course, it is vital that we show fairness to pensioners overseas but also to those who are working hard in the United Kingdom to pay their taxes.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My constituent David has significant health issues, recently described by his consultant as severe and debilitating. He recently had his personal independence payment cut and faces a lengthy wait for an appeal, which is impacting on his physical and mental health. When I wrote to the Secretary of State to ask her to expedite his hearing, I received a patronising and, frankly, inhumane response unbecoming of a Secretary of State. May we therefore have a debate to consider how we can fix this broken system?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a particular constituency case, and she is absolutely right to do so. I am sorry if she is not happy with the Department's response. Obviously, as I often say, I will raise the issue on her behalf, if she wants to write to me. Since the personal independence payment was introduced in 2013, there have been 3.9 million decisions and the total number of people unhappy with those decisions is less than 1% of all assessments. We are seeking to review and improve the system all the time, to make it easier for people to receive the care and support they need.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The best part of BBC “Question Time” is not the opinion of the panellists but the voice of the audience. Given that the “Question Time” that was due to be broadcast from Bolton was cancelled in favour of London, may we have a debate on how well our national broadcaster represents the nation as a whole?

Andrea Leadsom: I have every sympathy with my hon. Friend. Programming decisions of that kind are a matter for the BBC, but I note that it said that the business of the House was an important factor. We all want the BBC to broadcast right across the United Kingdom and facilitate proper debate across all regions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): At this time of year we, as Christians, remember the resurrection of Christ and offer thanks for his sacrifice and death on the cross, which offers hope of redemption and life eternal. We also remember all those countless persecuted Christians across the world who must believe, worship and pray in secret for fear of their life. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on how we in the UK can support the persecuted Church throughout the world?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this issue. He has a strong voice on the subject of religious persecution, and he will know that the United Kingdom is committed to freedom of religious belief. On 26 December 2018, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced an independent review of the persecution of Christians overseas. That review is to be conducted by the Bishop of Truro and will provide recommendations on additional practical steps that the Foreign Office can take to support persecuted Christians. The report is due by the summer.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): There is public concern that the Government are not following through on the will of the people. Does that now extend to all consultations? Can we have a statement on the Government’s response to consultations? Is it acceptable that the Government have felt able to discount the views of 80% of those who responded to their proposed divorce law changes, simply because many objected to them as the result of a campaign to raise awareness of that very consultation? Are some individuals’ responses more worthy than others? If a person has a view of conscience on policy, does it not count?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I know this is something she cares about very deeply, as do many hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House. The fact is that hostility and conflict between parents leaves a terrible mark on children and can damage their life chances, whether the parents are together or separated. Although we will always uphold the institution of marriage, it cannot be right that outdated laws help to create or increase conflict. All views will be taken into account, but nevertheless the Government, while listening to calls for reform, want to replace the requirement to provide evidence of fault and create the option of a joint application for divorce.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The Leader of the House said at business questions last week that the House would have a debate this week on the knife

crime summit. Why did that debate not happen? Why is there nothing in the future business? This should be a national priority.

While I am talking about issues on which we seem to be making no progress, will there be an update on the Timpson review of school exclusions?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that I announce the business for the following week at business questions on a Thursday morning. I am keen to facilitate further debates, as I already have, on the important issue of knife crime and serious violence. I will continue to seek to find Government time for such a debate.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards has said that he would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady on the Timpson review.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The last business questions before Easter is a good moment for cross-party unity, so may I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to the joint letter by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon)—the president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—and myself on behalf of Commonwealth servicemen and women in our armed forces? The letter seeks to waive the application, after four years’ service, for indefinite leave to remain, the cost of which has now risen to £10,000 for a family of four. I understand that the Defence Secretary has raised this issue with the Home Secretary. Meanwhile, may I seek the support and signatures of every Member present today, and the support of the Leader of the House, for both the issue and for a debate on it?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue on which there will be a lot of support from across the House. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate, so that all hon. Members may contribute to it.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Last month, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission launched the “Legacy of Liberation” campaign, marking 75 years since the liberation of Europe and the far east. That includes activities across the historical sites of the great escape, Monte Cassino, Normandy and Arnhem. Could we please have a debate allowing Members across the House to mark this milestone anniversary of when we did not just stand alone, but built alliances that delivered Europe from pure evil?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that issue. She rightly pays tribute to all those who gave so much in a co-ordinated effort to stamp out evil. It is right that we commemorate these anniversaries, and I will certainly see whether we can find time for such a debate.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, Christians around the world will be celebrating the resurrection on Easter Sunday, after the darkness of Good Friday, but for many Christians, particularly those in places like the middle belt of Nigeria, this is a very, very dark time, when they are under attack, seeing people—including members of their families—murdered,

[Jeremy Lefroy]

and churches burnt down. May we have a debate on that persecution of Christians and others in the middle belt of Nigeria and elsewhere?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. Specifically with regard to Nigeria, we continue to call for an immediate de-escalation of violence, and for the Nigerian Government to demonstrate a clear strategy for resolving the conflict, ending the violence and ensuring that the needs of all affected communities are met. The United Kingdom promotes tolerance and acceptance of different faiths and beliefs within our own country, but it is also something that we want to see right around the world.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I wonder whether the Government might provide time to debate the state of a political party whose primary policy is, by its own admission, to undamage our economy, which does not have a leader—just a caretaker manager; a party scared of the public, and even of standing in European elections, with its own MPs openly backing other parties, and which, according to its own accounts, receives more funding from dead people than from the living. But unlike those Tory donors, I will not hold my breath.

Andrea Leadsom: There is really no answer to that.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Several days ago I met volunteers in Broadfield, who are participating in a community action to clear up litter in that neighbourhood. Unfortunately, over the past five years Labour-controlled Crawley Borough Council has not issued a single litter penalty notice. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the responsibility of environmental health departments to support communities to clean up their local areas?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has thoroughly excited my lovely Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who as he knows is extremely keen on cleaning up our environment. He points out rightly that there is a duty on local authorities to ensure that we keep our communities, roads, hedgerows and waterways free of litter. I would encourage him to raise that at the next local government questions.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): May we have a debate on the vital importance of extending musical tuition to those from low-income backgrounds and deprived areas? I particularly commend the work of the Beatroute Arts centre in my constituency, which recently received a £69,000 grant from the Young Start funding programme. It does very important work in the constituency, particularly in extending opportunity to young people who would not normally be able to access private musical tuition or elite institutions such as the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, which are often disproportionately enjoyed by middle-class families. Can we commend the extension of that opportunity to those from all backgrounds?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Gentleman in commending that arts centre for its work for young people. It is absolutely vital that young people get to

enjoy the wonders of music and taking part in performance, and I totally commend all those who seek to make that happen.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I, too, welcome the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones). I would like to reassure her that Parliament and governance is not always like this—intent on self-destruction. How soon after the talks between the Government and Labour collapse will the Leader of the House be able to bring forward indicative votes? Will she allow an indicative vote to take place that allows the Prime Minister's deal to be linked to a people's vote?

Andrea Leadsom: We had a people's vote in 2016. The result of that was clear. We will be leaving the European Union just as soon as we have been able to find a way forward that works for the United Kingdom and for our EU friends and neighbours, and that this House can support.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Constituents of mine, the Riddells, an Australian couple, run a community bakery that employs 15 people. They have just had their visas refused by the Home Office because of a very small error that could have been quickly and easily rectified, but it has taken over six months for the family to be told of it. Now they are desperately awaiting an admin review, but they need their passports back to travel to their daughter's wedding in Australia in a few days' time. Their life in Scotland and jobs in my constituency now hang in the balance. How would the Leader of the House suggest we might encourage the Home Office to routinely contact applicants at the beginning of the visa process, raising any questions over their documents, to give people a chance to sort those out in good time?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very good point about the need for urgency in the rectification of small errors, so that people can get on with their lives. She has raised a particular constituency issue, and if she wants to write to me I can take it up with the Home Office on her behalf.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I am concerned that many applications to go on the electoral register are being stymied for administrative reasons, such as the lack of a national insurance number. May we have a statement from the Cabinet Office containing an estimate of the number of uncompleted voter registration applications, and stating what the Government are doing to overcome such hurdles so that we can boost electoral registration?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that hon. Members right across the House want to see electoral registration boosted and improved. That is precisely what the Cabinet Office is seeking to do, while at the same time minimising any prospect of electoral fraud. We have Cabinet Office questions on Wednesday 24 April—the first Wednesday back—and I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise that question then.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): A few weeks ago, I asked the Leader of the House for a debate on climate change. Young people and many of

us in this place want to see more energy and urgency in addressing the issue. Tomorrow will see yet another climate change strike, including, I believe, at schools in Warwick and Leamington. Given that we now know what a black hole looks like at the heart of Government, will the Leader of the House take the opportunity to fill the power vacuum and grant us a full debate?

Andrea Leadsom: As I said to the hon. Gentleman on the previous occasion, I will try to find Government time. We had a debate in February, which unfortunately many hon. Members were unable to attend because they had other commitments. The subject is important; it is one of the single most important issues that face our world today. The Government's work towards tackling global climate change has been second to none. We have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 nation. We have generated record levels of solar and wind energy. The latest figures show that we have reduced greenhouse gas by 25% since 2010, and Carbon Brief analysis shows that UK CO₂ emissions have fallen for six years in a row, which is the longest decline on record. So there is a lot more to be done, but the Government are taking action.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Last month, the Home Secretary made a very welcome announcement of new funding for security at mosques and other places of worship. Following my question in Home Office orals on 1 April, nearly 100 colleagues have written to ask for that funding to be brought forward in good time for Ramadan, which is just three and a half weeks away. Could the Leader of the House arrange an urgent statement for as soon as we come back, about what the Home Office is doing to ensure that our Muslim constituents are safe during Ramadan—a time when the community is highly visible?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a really important point. I know that the Home Office is absolutely committed to ensuring the safety and security of all those who are at worship, at all times. If she wants to write to me following the business question, I can take up her specific question directly.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): When we come back from Easter recess, can we have, in Government time, a debate and a vote on changes to pension credit? Would that not be a great opportunity for this House to stand up for 1950s-born women, who are now referring to these changes as a toy boy tax?

Andrea Leadsom: I know that the hon. Gentleman has been very committed to campaigning on this issue, and he is absolutely right to do so. He knows that we have had many debates on the topic in recent months and years. As we have made clear previously, Conservatives in government have committed £1.1 billion to support those affected, so that no one will see their pension age change by more than 18 months relative to the Pensions Act 1995 timetable, and those with the most significant changes receive at least seven years' notice. The new state pension is much more generous for many women. By 2030, more than 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 more per year as a result of the recent reforms.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): As the Leader of the House will be aware, the last Wednesday in April is International Guide Dogs Day. I want to draw attention

to the competition being run in the Scottish Parliament by the Kennel Club for Holyrood dog of the year—I will put in a plug for Giles, Iain Gray MSP's guide dog puppy. May we have a debate in Government time on the role of assistance dogs for individuals who need them in our communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. Many people rely on assistance dogs just to get through the day, and not only as a companion but to provide practical support in their everyday needs. I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that other Members can share their experiences.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Too many of my constituents, such as those living on the Isles of Cumbrae and the Isle of Arran, continue to be penalised with unfair delivery charges. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her views on the need for action to ensure that all consumers are offered the lowest possible cost regardless of where they live, and does she agree that, as more shopping is done online, this is very urgent?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. A number of her hon. Friends have raised that issue at business questions in recent weeks. It is absolutely right that there should be fair and reasonable delivery charges right across the United Kingdom. We have Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Question Time on 30 April, so I encourage her to raise the matter directly with Ministers then.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Julian Assange was arrested a couple of hours ago, and in an hour or two the Home Secretary will make a statement about it. Why can he not do the same for knife crime and the knife crime summit? Young people are being murdered on our streets every single week, and it has been going on for months. Communities are worried and concerned—many are devastated—yet the Home Secretary has gone missing. It is a complete and utter embarrassment to this Parliament and to the office he holds. He needs to get himself here and answer some questions about this very serious issue. Will the Leader of the House go to him and say, "Get here, Home Secretary, and make a statement about knife crime."?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman feels extremely strongly about this, and I absolutely sympathise with his view. He will appreciate, as will all hon. Members, that this issue comes up frequently at business questions, and I do keep the House updated on the several different measures that the Government have in train to tackle it, including through early prevention, through working with communities and with police officers, through legislation such as the Offensive Weapons Bill, through our serious violence taskforce and indeed through the public health approach to preventing knife crime. However, I hear what he is saying and I will take this up again with the Home Office.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We have seen the scandal of Windrush and, in Hackney, we have thousands of Commonwealth citizens who are likely to be affected. Some 41,000 European citizens are going through the immigration process and

[Meg Hillier]

there are increasing problems with entrepreneur and spouse visas. Is it not time we had a proper debate in Government time about the functioning, or mis-functioning, of the Government's immigration system?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Home Secretary made a statement to the House about the Windrush compensation scheme only a few days ago, so I hope that she had the opportunity to raise her concerns with him then. I understand that she has particular concerns. If she wants to raise those with Home Office Ministers, I am sure that they will be delighted to meet her to discuss them.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The ongoing show trial of 18 Catalan political prisoners in Madrid, including the former Speaker of the Catalan Parliament, Carme Forcadell, has been an utter sham, with evidence that would have exposed the charges for the nonsense they are being disallowed by the Spanish court. May we have a debate on the importance of the independence of the courts and of this Government's double standards in promoting that across the globe while ignoring the situation in Madrid?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that Spain and the United Kingdom have a very strong and open relationship. The UK is always clear about the need to work within the rules of the constitution and the law and to seek assurances at all times that they are being upheld.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Brunei, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have two things in common. First, they are repressive regimes that breach international human rights for women and LGBT people every day. Secondly, they are recipients of UK Government military training. May we have an urgent statement from the Defence Secretary on the hypocrisy of our Government's policy?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a really concerning issue. It is appalling that in the 21st century people still face discrimination and persecution because of who they are or who they love. The Government urge Brunei to uphold its international human rights obligations and to respect individual freedoms. She will know that there was a discussion about that yesterday in this place—I think that she was there. I can assure her that the Government will continue to express our deep concern at ministerial and diplomatic levels.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Many women across the UK have been led to believe that they were at fault and responsible for the birth defects of their own children, when in fact they had taken the hormone pregnancy drug primodos. My constituent Wilma Ord and her daughter Kirsteen have been waiting for answers and justice for Kirsteen's whole life. We are due to have a debate in Westminster Hall on Wednesday 23 April. I am grateful for the answer the Leader of the House gave to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), but could she clarify for my constituents and me at what time the debate will be held, and will she give an absolute assurance that it will not be shifted or changed as a result of whatever shambles next appears in this place?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very serious issue, and she will know that there has been a consultation and evidence gathering about the problem. I am glad to hear that she has a debate in Westminster Hall. I will have to write to her after these business questions, because I do not know at exactly what time the debate is scheduled to start.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It was announced this week that the boss of Centrica, which owns British Gas, has got a 44% pay increase, which comes off the back of 10% rises in gas bills for my constituents. People are rightly asking whether that is a fair and reasonable way to proceed with our utilities, which everyone needs. May we therefore have a debate on controlling corporate greed?

Andrea Leadsom: There will be a lot of sympathy across the House for the hon. Gentleman on the need for corporate pay to remain at a suitable level and not to be excessive. There are concerns across the House about excessive corporate pay. However, he will no doubt be pleased to know that income inequality is at an historically low level. The Government are seeking to do all we can to curb excesses.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): This feels like groundhog day, because here I am again, about to ask the Leader of the House where the immigration Bill is. The Prime Minister said that we need to get on with something, and here is a list of something. Delighted though I am to see the return of the seed potatoes statutory instrument, for what I think is the fourth time, I really think it is time we debated the Bills that need to be passed. The immigration Bill is of critical concern to many of my constituents and, I am sure, to those of Members across the House. Where is it?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will know that, in addition to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, there are nine exit-related Bills, which are either before Parliament or have already received Royal Assent. The Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill has completed its Committee stage and will progress at the right time in order to ensure that it receives Royal Assent when necessary to implement our new immigration policy. She will appreciate that, to an extent, that depends on the agreement we come to with the European Union.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The Government's recent review of Whirlpool tumble dryers paid little attention to product recall and consumer safety. The London Fire Brigade, Electrical Safety First and *Which?* joined me in calling for better product recall processes for dangerous products. Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue about dangerous products and the appalling impact that they can have if, for example, they catch fire in somebody's home. She is right to raise this issue, and I encourage her to discuss it directly with Ministers on 30 April at Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is now obvious that the UK will be taking part in the European Union parliamentary elections and, as a

consequence, the regulated spend period began on 23 January. This will have implications not just for political parties, but for non-party campaigning organisations that may already have spent over the limit on targeted online adverts. Before the House goes into Easter recess, can the Leader of the House advise us—or ensure that a Minister from the Cabinet Office attends the House to advise us—on what the implications are for any third-party organisations that may have already breached the spending limits?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very serious matter. I encourage her to write to the Cabinet Office with her specific request. However, let me say more generally that none of us wants European parliamentary elections to be held, and as long as the UK leaves the EU before 23 May, they will not take place. The Government are doing everything they can to ensure that the UK has reached an agreement by that date. However, let me be clear: any extension beyond 12 April was going to put on us a legal obligation to have European parliamentary elections on 23 May in train. If the withdrawal agreement becomes law on both sides before 23 May, no European Union parliamentary elections will be held.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is reported that Stagecoach has been banned from bidding for further franchises, with pensions cited as a specific reason. The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers has rightly raised concerns about train operating companies meeting their pension liabilities. What can this Government do to ensure that train operating companies are meeting those liabilities and that there will be no attacks on pension rates of staff?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point about workers' rights. I am not sure whether he was able to attend the earlier urgent question, but if he was not, he might like to raise the matter directly with Ministers at Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on 20 April.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): When can this House expect to receive the Cox report recommendations and see them implemented in full?

Andrea Leadsom: The House received the Cox recommendations—there were three of them—some time ago. The first one has already been done. I am keen to make progress on the second as soon as possible. I am just waiting for the House of Commons Commission to finalise its agreement on the proposed way forward, which will enable historic allegations to be tackled properly. On the third recommendation, a small committee is being established by the Clerk of the House on behalf of the House of Commons Commission to look at how to remove Members of Parliament from marking their own homework.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Stop and search is controversial and a highly sensitive issue for many communities, yet it is regarded as an important police power. This power can sometimes lead to strip search, the regulations of which are ambiguous. Strip search can also lead to humiliation and mental health problems. Can we have a debate on stop and search, specifically in relation to strip search?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very concerning issue. Obviously, stop and search is a vital policing power that is important in the fight against knife crime and serious violence. At the same time, it must be used legally and in a measured way. She is right to raise the issue. She might want to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can discuss it directly with Ministers.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It stands to reason that the older we get, the more likely we are to develop health conditions and to need additional support mechanisms, and yet too many state benefits are tied to the working age. Once a person retires, they no longer get these benefits. One example is the vehicle excise duty. I have a constituent who cannot believe that his frail 84-year-old mum still has to pay her road tax. Can we have a debate in Government time about extending benefits and support mechanisms for people beyond working age?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very interesting point. He will be aware that there are a number of benefits that our older population receive, such as free bus passes, free TV licences and not having to pay for prescriptions, eye tests, hearing tests and so on. Nevertheless, he raises an interesting issue and he might like to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can share their views on the matter.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am delighted that we are having an Easter recess. At the rate we were going, I thought that we would get to Easter Sunday and the good Lord would be rising again before this House ever did. *[Interruption.]* Thank you very much! However, I am worried that the business that the Government have announced does not seem to address any of the issues that were raised by Donald Tusk last night. Surely this parliamentary Session has now run its course. We should decide to end it and start all over again. The Government can come up with a new Queen's speech, which will doubtless contain many interesting things, so that we can really get on with tackling the issues that face this country, including poverty wages, poverty, austerity and local authorities that cannot meet their proper responsibilities.

Andrea Leadsom: Well, the hon. Gentleman was doing so well until that last bit. Obviously, the way forward is something that the Prime Minister needs to consider carefully. She will be making a statement to the House shortly, so he will be able to direct his questions to her. When he talks about our economy and the state of our society, he should be pleased that there is an extra £1 billion available for the police, more than £1.3 billion extra available for local councils, more than £1.1 billion extra for our schools, a rise in the national living wage, another rise in the personal allowance, another fuel duty freeze, and a rise in the basic state pension, which is now more than £1,450 a year higher than in 2010. Added to that, more than 3.6 million more people are in work and we have the lowest unemployment since the 1970s. He is rolling his eyes, but this is really good news for real people.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Members of this House will doubtless be pleased that the House is not reconvening until 23 April. However, my constituent, who was unfortunate enough to claim universal credit

[Ruth George]

five days before the Secretary of State decided that people on severe disability premiums should not be claiming universal credit and who is therefore undergoing a weekly detriment to his income of almost £100 a week, is waiting for the managed migration regulations for universal credit to be laid by this House in order for his back payment to be made. He and thousands of other disabled people living well below the poverty line need those regulations to be laid. When will that happen, please?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is raising a very serious constituency issue, and I am very sorry to hear about it. If she wants to write to me, I will happily take it up with the Department on her behalf. In more general terms, we spend £55 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions. That is up more than £10 billion in real terms since 2010. Under this Government, the number of disabled people in work has increased by more than 900,000 in the past five years. That shows a really important Government commitment to doing everything we can for people with disabilities.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I am told that some people seeking mental health support are just being given a phone number to ring by their GP. For vulnerable people, this can be quite difficult, but it shows the pressure that GPs and mental health services are under. Can we have a statement on the Government's plans properly to resource and deliver effective mental health services?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right that mental health is absolutely vital to all of us. The Government are putting in more money—a record £12 billion—and are taking more action on mental health than any previous Government. At the heart of the NHS long-term plan is the largest expansion of mental health services in a generation: £2.3 billion of extra investment to support almost 345,000 more children, at least 380,000 more adults and 24,000 new and expectant mothers. It will see 24/7 mental health crisis care for adults, children and young people, which will be rolled out through NHS 111. What is vital is that people have access to support as soon as they need it.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May we have a debate about digital inclusion—not just about broadband access but about mobile phone signal and basic television services? That is still a huge issue in many parts of the country, including in my constituency, where some communities and villages do not even get a basic mobile phone signal. I would be grateful to the Leader of the House if she found some time for a debate about that important subject.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman—that is a big issue for many of us. I, too, have problems with basic mobile phone signal, as well as with broadband, in my constituency. The Government are committed to resolving this issue and to having a universal service obligation to demonstrate that we will have universal broadband coverage of at least 10 megabits per second, so that no home or business is left behind. I am sure that there would be great demand for a debate in Westminster Hall should the hon. Gentleman want to ask for one.

Points of Order

12.40 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I gave you notice just now of the point I am about to raise, which is a very important question relating to what happened last night.

In respect of the question I put to the Leader of the House about last night's abject surrender by the Prime Minister to the EU on the extension of the time until our exit day from the EU—which, by the way, the Leader of the House herself and members of the Cabinet refused to support the other day—is it still competent for the Government to move motion 3 on today's Order Paper, since it contradicts motion 1 on the same Order Paper?

Secondly, Mr Speaker, can you confirm that there is nothing to prevent the Government from moving motion 3 now so the House can indeed sit tomorrow to debate regulations that are, in my judgment, unlawful and not in the national interest? Many hon. Members will table a prayer in order to debate and oppose them tomorrow. Depriving us of the ability to debate those regulations tomorrow is an act of cowardice and chicanery, and the fact that the shadow Leader of the House did not raise these issues smacks of collusion with the Government to avoid a debate. The whole thing stinks.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I will respond to the hon. Gentleman, but the Leader of the House is signalling a willingness to comment and therefore I think we should hear from her.

Andrea Leadsom: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I think I can clear this up. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) is absolutely right that two motions were laid yesterday. In the event that the European Union had declined to provide an extension to article 50, we would have been leaving the European Union without a deal tomorrow. Therefore, it was felt that we needed to have a motion laid, as a contingency plan, for the House to sit tomorrow should it be the case that we were leaving without a deal tomorrow. However, I also laid the motion for the Easter recess. The fact of the matter is that later today I will be moving item 1 on the Order Paper, which is the Easter Adjournment, and we will not be moving item 3, which is the sittings of the House motion. I hope that clears things up, Mr Speaker.

Sir William Cash *rose—*

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) *rose—*

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I will indulge the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) further in a moment. I am perfectly clear about the position. There is a manifest incompatibility between the moving of motion 1 and the moving of motion 3, a point that has not been gainsaid by the Leader of the House. She has, in fact, explained that it was really a matter of prudent preparation, if I can put it that way, and contingency planning that the Government wanted to afford themselves what I

would describe, without levity, as the backstop of motion 3 in the event that the circumstances warranted its deployment. The circumstances do not warrant its deployment, and therefore they resort, perfectly properly, to motion 1, which I rather anticipate, if we proceed in an orderly fashion, the Government will in due course move.

Of course, I always treat the hon. Gentleman with the very greatest of respect, like all Members. He is a serious authority on parliamentary procedure, and I will indulge him further in a moment, but not before I have heard other colleagues.

Henry Smith: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When constituents send me—indeed, all of us—to this place, they expect us to be able to vote and have a voice on important issues that affect the future of the country. Therefore, Sir, can you advise me when we might get a chance to vote on the extension agreed yesterday evening at the European Council by the Prime Minister to the UK's exit date from the EU to 31 October?

Mr Speaker: Well, if the Government proceed as they intend to, there will not be such an opportunity today, but there is a prospect, or a possibility, of such an opportunity at a later date. If the hon. Gentleman is asking me whether I think there will be an opportunity today, in the light of the sequence of events and the way in which the Government intend to proceed, the answer is no, not today. That point I think has been anticipated and already, if you will, deprecated by his hon. Friend the Member for Stone. It may well be something that he also deprecates, which is the implication of his point of order, but nevertheless that is the situation with which we are confronted.

Bob Blackman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. Clearly, if Government motion 1 succeeds tonight—I hope it will—there will be no business next week, but Members across the House have submitted questions for business next week, and Adjournment debates and other debates have been requested. May we have guidance on when those Question Times will take place, what the status is of questions that have been submitted already, and also, of course, when the shuffle will be, so Members know which questions have been chosen?

Mr Speaker: That is a perfectly reasonable inquiry. My understanding—I think it is also in conformity with what has happened in the past—is that we would simply roll forward by a week. Therefore, I must advise hon. Members that it is not intended that the shuffle will be done again. If the hon. Gentleman was successful in the shuffle—I do not know, because I am not privy to that—he can dance around the mulberry bush in joyous appreciation of the fact that, when we do get to those questions scheduled for the following week, his success is something to which he can continue to cling. I hope that brings happiness into the life of the hon. Gentleman.

Sir William Cash: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am most grateful to you again. You used the word “deprecate” just now. You will forgive me for perhaps embellishing it by saying, frankly, that I think this whole thing stinks. It is completely unacceptable, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith)

pointed out, that we should be denied the opportunity to debate these questions today or tomorrow, given their importance to the national interest.

Mr Speaker: My counsel to the hon. Gentleman, whom I am not seeking to contradict or to argue with, is that if he feels as he does, it is open to him to vote against motion 1 when it is proposed by the Government, which will be at some point today. That opportunity does exist for him. I am well aware of the consternation, indeed bordering upon disgust, of the hon. Gentleman at the way in which a number of matters have proceeded in recent times—I am referring not specifically or only to Government handling, but to other matters of parliamentary procedure that have attracted his indignation—but there is a recourse for him, and it is to vote against motion 1.

Moreover, the hon. Gentleman requires no encouragement from me, but if he wishes to vent his displeasure about these matters, he will have the opportunity to do so with eloquence and force when the Prime Minister comes to address the House today. The hon. Gentleman, I feel certain, will be superglued to his seat until the point at which I call him, when he will leap to his feet with alacrity—and he can rest assured that on this occasion, as on every other, he will be heard.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will know that historically parliamentary Sessions have normally lasted roughly a year, although sometimes they are much shorter and sometimes, particularly when there is a general election, they go on longer. We have nearly got to the 24-month point in this Session, which has implications for the number of Opposition day debates and so on. Even including the one that has been announced today, we have still had only 22 Opposition day debates, whereas pro rata we should have had 40 in this period. I just wonder whether you have had any intimation from the Government as to when this Session might prorogue, when we might have a Queen's Speech, and when we might start the new Session of Parliament so that the process can start all over again. I hear rumours that the Government are now intending to keep the Session going until 31 October, which would be, yet again, to deny this House the opportunity to have some time of its own.

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that I have had no intimation from the Government that they plan to bring this Session to a close. I have had no indication at all of an early—well, not early, but imminent—Prorogation. What he says is true. The situation that faces us at the moment is, in that respect but also in many others, unusual. What he says about the under-supply of Opposition days is really a statement of fact. I well understand that there is much irritation about it, and I have myself commented on it. It is a most unusual way in which to proceed, but that is the situation at present, and I am not aware of any imminent plan to change it. Of course if it does not change and this Session runs on, and there is a continued under-supply of Opposition days, I suspect that that will be the subject of coruscating criticism, not least and not only from the hon. Gentleman.

Let me just give a further response to the hon. Member for Stone, because I think it is important to be accurate about this and to try to render—I keep trying to do this—our proceedings intelligible to people who are

[Mr Speaker]

interested in them but are not parliamentarians or parliamentary anoraks. I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019 passed earlier this week makes regulations changing exit day, subject to the negative procedure. Under that procedure, Ministers make the regulations, which are then subject to annulment by a resolution in either House in the form of a Humble Address praying that the regulations be annulled. Such a prayer can be tabled as an early-day motion in the Table Office. As a matter of fact, of course, not many prayers are debated, but the Government do find time for some to be debated either in a Delegated Legislation Committee or on the Floor of the House.

As far as I know, the regulations changing exit day to match the unanimous decision of the EU Council agreed with the United Kingdom last night have not yet been laid. If the regulations changing exit day are made and laid today, the hon. Gentleman may table a prayer, today, as an early-day motion. Regulations subject to the negative procedure can be laid on any day during the existence of a Parliament, as provided for by Standing Order No. 159. So it is perfectly in order for the regulations changing exit day to be laid tomorrow, in which case he could not table his early-day motion until the day the House returns, Tuesday 23 April—a fact of which I think he is aware and which he deplures.

Given the urgency with exit day in domestic law still fixed as 11 pm tomorrow—Friday 12 April—the hon. Gentleman asks if the Government will move motion 3 on today's Order Paper so that the regulations can be debated tomorrow. I think I have already responded to that point by saying that the Government clearly intend to move motion 1, and it would be preposterous to move both 1 and 3. The Leader of the House has made clear the Government's intention that the House should, at its rising today, adjourn until Tuesday 23 April.

I think that is the best explanation that I can offer to colleagues at this time. However, I am very seized of the procedural issues involved, and I am by no means insensitive to the rights of Members of the House, who should have their opportunity, by one means or t'other—and preferably by more means than just one—to register their objections. For now, we must proceed. I remind you, colleagues, that we are at an early stage in our proceedings. We are not even halfway through the parliamentary day yet, so we need to retain a glint in our eyes and a spring in our step.

Discrimination in Football

12.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on discrimination in football.

The Government are concerned about the recent rise in racist abuse in football which threatens to overshadow everything we love about our national sport. Last weekend, the English Football League said that it was “saddened, disappointed and angered” after a weekend of fixtures was blighted by four separate incidents of alleged racism against players. At the same time, in the Premier League, Crystal Palace's Wilfried Zaha re-posted an online tweet calling him “a diving monkey”. This all happened on the very same weekend that the Premier League's new “No Room for Racism” campaign was visible at grounds up and down the country.

Late last year, the unthinkable occurred—a banana skin was thrown on the pitch in the direction of a player during the north London derby. At the same time, we saw the abuse that Manchester City forward Raheem Sterling suffered at Stamford Bridge. We all witnessed the appalling scenes of racism directed at several of our England players in Montenegro. Homophobic and anti-semitic chanting, both here and abroad, has been prevalent in recent times. English football is revered across the globe for its excitement and passion. No other sport or country opens its doors and embraces so many different nationalities. We simply cannot have millions of people, particularly our young people, tuning into or witnessing at first hand the type of vile abuse that has been apparent of late—abuse directed at our players and our managers by opposing fans.

Wilfried Zaha, Raheem Sterling, and Danny Rose deserve our respect for speaking out about the abuse that is happening now, but ultimately they deserve our support. They need clear demonstrations that zero tolerance of this behaviour means just that. Be it player, manager or supporter—whether playing or attending—nobody who goes to games should have to tolerate discrimination of any kind. We welcomed the Football Association's call for UEFA to take strong and swift action following events in Montenegro. However, if this country is going to show the rest of the world that this behaviour is intolerable, we need to ensure that we are making every effort to combat discriminatory behaviour domestically.

I want to put it on record that there is some fantastic work being done by many of our clubs to stand up to the challenge of racism and intolerance. It must be said that the vast majority of football fans behave impeccably, creating a fantastic atmosphere that is a major part of the experience of watching live football. Racism is not of football's making, but sadly it is being used by certain individuals and groups to spread hate. This extends to the grassroots, with Kick It Out reporting a rise in racist incidents at this level too. It cannot be right for clubs to be fined for players taking action and walking off the pitch if they are receiving racist abuse. It is vital that players are supported. This type of fine sends the wrong signal. The FA must review whether its rules, as they stand, and the guidance it gives to clubs are effective for use in these situations.

Putting a stop to this is a challenge that affects all fans, all clubs and all football agencies, at all levels. The Government are determined to help in tackling this problem. On 25 February, I brought many of the various administrators, campaign bodies, fan group representatives, players, managers and organisations together for a summit to discuss this issue and collectively decide on what steps they must take to help to eradicate it. At that summit, it was agreed that a number of areas needed to be examined further.

There were six initial areas: first, to review whether football's current sanctioning regime goes far enough and, if not, what more is needed to act as a deterrent to this type of behaviour; secondly, to ensure that the partnership between football authorities and the police is close enough to improve the identification and sanctioning of offenders at matches; thirdly, to ask whether we give enough support to stewards and whether we can improve their capacity to deal with discrimination consistently throughout the leagues; fourthly, whether football can improve the information flow of incident reporting on the pitch, and support players; fifthly, how we can double down on efforts to ensure that match officials, stewarding operations and coaching and academy staff are all fully able to engage in their responsibilities to maintain an open and inclusive sporting environment; and finally, initiatives to help to increase the numbers of people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds into football professions beyond playing, with transparency and opportunities in the recruitment process absolutely central to this.

The Government will work with those key groups to deliver clear, tangible actions in the areas I have just described. My intention is to announce these in partnership with football before the end of the summer. If we are able to deliver them before, even better. I want to see change ready for the next season.

The ongoing cross-Government sport strategy "Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation" seeks to ensure that access to sport is equal for all. It is vital that the atmosphere and environment in which sport and physical activity take place in our communities, whether at grassroots or elite level, are safe, supportive and free of discrimination and intolerance. The experience of players, staff and fans at football games both home and abroad will prove the ultimate test of success in this area. I am confident that the appetite is there to accept that challenge, and by working in partnership we will quash this disturbing and ugly recent trend of racism across our beautiful game.

1.1 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Although we are only halfway through proceedings, Mr Speaker, it is a pleasure to see you remaining jolly and calm.

I commend the Minister for making this particular statement, and I thank her for advance sight of it. I am sure that I speak for those on both sides of the House when I say that we appreciate her personal commitment to tackling discrimination in sport in all its forms. I agree that the vast majority of football fans see racism, homophobia, sectarianism and bigotry as the ugly side of the beautiful game. But hardly a week goes by without an example of discrimination.

We were all shocked by the blatant racism during the game against Montenegro last month. Hearing Danny Rose say after that match that he cannot wait to see the

back of football because of racism is deeply depressing, but sadly not surprising. When young players face abuse time and again, who can blame them for wanting to walk away? The bravery shown by those players is commendable, but they should not have to be brave when they are only trying to do their jobs. I agree with the Minister when she says that players should never be punished for walking off a pitch after receiving racist abuse, and I was disappointed to hear that the Wythenshawe Town manager, James Kinsey, has been sanctioned for taking his team off the pitch after alleged racism from a linesman.

I have some suggestions for the Minister to help to battle bigotry as soon as it rears its head. First, stewards can work more closely with police to identify offenders, intervene early and gather good evidence to facilitate arrests and charges. The Ministry of Justice could encourage the Crown Prosecution Service to give football hate speech a higher priority and impose harsher sentences. The Government could increase support for education programmes, such as those run by Show Racism the Red Card and Kick It Out, both of which have seen cuts as a result of central Government cuts to local government. Let us also be aware that the far right is attempting to infiltrate football again through groups such as the Football Lads Alliance, which marched in London only a few weeks ago, when some of their members were seen giving Nazi salutes.

We should also be aware that the problem is not only on the pitch and in the stands but online and in the media. The Minister mentioned Crystal Palace's Wilfried Zaha, who retweeted some of the horrendous racism he receives. Given that so much of the racist abuse directed at players is online, will the Minister explicitly include hate crimes aimed at sporting figures in the online harms consultation?

Raheem Sterling, in my view a hero, has called out the ways in which media portrayals fuel racism, in particular the disparaging way in which a young black player was treated for buying a house for his mum compared with a white player doing the same. Does the Minister agree that there is a problem and that some news outlets need to be more responsible?

It is not just racism. Other types of bigotry, such as homophobia and sectarianism, plague the game. The Scottish Parliament has united in committing £14 million since 2012 to tackle sectarianism on the terraces. Can the Minister match that for English football? Campaigns such as Football v Homophobia are doing great work, but six out of 10 LGBT supporters say they have witnessed homophobic abuse.

The Minister is right that the vast majority of fans abhor discrimination of any kind. A small number of thugs who propagate that vile bigotry ruin football for the players and millions of fans who love the game. We do not always agree on things across the House, but we are in absolute unity on this. Discrimination of any kind has no place in football. I and my team will do everything we can to work with her and her team to drive it out.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his tone and collegiate approach on this issue. It is right that we stand and work together on the issue of intolerance, whether it happens in sport or our communities. Football cannot and should not be used as a cloak for racism and

[Mims Davies]

intolerance, and it is sad that players have decided to walk off the pitch because they have simply had enough. I applaud them. They reserve the right to stay on the pitch and do their job, and enjoy the game, and they reserve the right to walk off and do what they feel is right. We should be willing to tackle the ugly side, as the hon. Gentleman describes it, of the beautiful game.

Members on both sides of the House will have heard the reaction from Danny Rose, which was heartbreaking. We need to support the bravery of players to do their jobs and to speak out in this day and age, but they should not feel they have to do that. It is right that players should take action and we are working with the police to make sure that we support them. The UK Football Policing Unit, alongside the Home Office, will continue to work on concerns about hate crime, football and the rise of the far right coming together to spread intolerance and fear in our communities. It is right that we use the Online Harms White Paper in this, and the Secretary of State has just said that harassment will be included. It is right that sports stars and others on the frontline can be supported through this process.

Let us stop this. Let us stand up to it. Everybody needs to be on the right side of this and call it out. Let us support Show Racism the Red Card and Kick It Out. People should use the app and report to their clubs. People in the stands know who these people are, and we need to make sure they do not do it in our name, the name of our club or the name of football.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I was appalled to hear Danny Rose say that he, as a professional footballer, could not wait for his career to end. He is a Tottenham legend for scoring the winning goal in the north London derby on his debut with a stunning volley. He should be praised as a footballer, not condemned by racist abuse. We must get to a position in which those who utter racist abuse at football matches are identified, ejected and charged with their crime, and the good fans, who do not want to see this happen, are not punished as a result of the bad fans who utter this racist abuse.

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for standing up for the good fans. There are many of them, but the bad behaviour tars everyone with a very bad brush. We need to support the people who are doing the right thing.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Can I bring consensus back and thank the Minister for early sight of the statement? I associate myself with the comments made by the Minister and the Labour Front-Bench spokesman, and it is not often that I can say that.

The recent high-profile instances of racism in the game fly in the face of the fantastic work done over the years by groups such as Show Racism the Red Card and Kick It Out. Sadly, however, although football in England at any rate is swimming in money, a relatively small amount is spent by the game on such initiatives. I very much welcome the Minister's tone and the actions she has set out. I think we can all agree that it is time for footballing authorities and top-level clubs to take the issue more seriously and invest in resources appropriately, and not just invest but make proper policy and disciplinary

decisions. The example of James Kinsey, whom the Minister and shadow Minister referred to, being disciplined for taking his team off the pitch following racist abuse is shameful. I praise the reaction of players such as Raheem Sterling and Danny Rose to their abuse, but they must be better supported by bodies such as UEFA, which all too often issue paltry fines that amount to a pittance in the modern game.

As the shadow Secretary of State outlined, since 2012 the Scottish Government have invested £14 million to support the delivery of anti-sectarian education in schools, prisons, workplaces and communities. Does the Minister agree that knowledge education is one of the best means of tackling ignorance and must be part of the solution? Does she also agree that it is important to increase public awareness of the options open to fans to report racist incidents? The fact that less than half of all fans are aware of the Kick It Out smartphone app is disappointing to say the least.

Finally, the lower leagues and the grassroots take their example from the top-level game. It is simply not good enough in this day and age that only 4% of coaching and management roles across the top four leagues in England are held by black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals. Does the Minister agree that reducing discrimination in the boardrooms and on the training grounds would go a long way towards changing wider attitudes in society?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising important points about the ability to report with confidence through the Kick It Out app and about the education piece, which is vital. We want our football clubs across the land to be welcoming, diverse and representative of the communities they serve. They should absolutely be tolerant places where people want to be, not places where they feel they have to speak out about behaviours that are not acceptable, whether in the pub or the wider community. We must work together as fellow sports fans and do our level best to ensure that football is welcoming at every level.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): May I commend the approach taken by the two premiership clubs in my constituency? Fulham has had a long tradition as a pioneer in combating racism in football. Obviously, Chelsea has had more trouble over the years, but the recent instance in December with Raheem Sterling, to which my hon. Friend referred, led to tough action—led personally by the chairman of the club, Bruce Buck—against four supporters. Does she agree that clubs such as Chelsea need to keep up the pressure on these abhorrent fans and ensure that racism in football is stamped out entirely in the coming days?

Mims Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising the good work done in the community. I have met with Fulham, been to its training ground and seen the work it does in the community, and have also met with Chelsea about particular issues. The pride in a football club and the badge can be used so positively, and we must harness that.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): This year I had the pleasure of judging the football community trust club of the year awards and was able to read the testimonies of many football clubs and see how much work is done

at those clubs to tackle racism in our communities. Football as an institution probably does more than any other. Does the Minister agree that if we are to show leadership as politicians, we must put our own houses in order and set the highest standards for membership of our organisations when it comes to Islamophobia and antisemitic behaviour?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that event on the terrace here in the House of Commons, which showed how much good work is done in clubs across the land. It is absolutely right that we do not lose sight of the positive things happening in our communities and, above all, that we are not afraid of standing up to intolerance, because frankly that does no one any good.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I recently attended my first West Ham game at the London stadium. It has an amazing family atmosphere, and I spoke to the foundation about what it is doing to support the Kick It Out campaign. Does my hon. Friend agree that football matches have a special ability to bring together people of all ages and backgrounds, and that racist language and abuse must never be allowed to undermine that by normalising division in the eyes of young people or making aspiring players feel excluded from sharing the joy of the game?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. I think that football has come an incredibly long way from where we were in the '80s, but frankly that is not good enough. Football is a family game and is incredibly welcoming, but small pockets of people continue to use it as a cloak—although it is no disguise, frankly—for intolerance. They should know better. They should look around and see that it is they who have got it wrong.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I and the vast majority of Newcastle United fans condemn utterly the racist abuse that Zaha received after the Crystal Palace game on Saturday. I was at the game and there was certainly no abuse in the Gallowgate end, where I was. That would not have been the case 30 or 40 years ago, when I would avoid St James' Park because of the racists there, but the club, football institutions and fans came together to kick the racists out. That has not happened in certain European countries, which are frankly still in the dark ages, so will the Minister look at taking UEFA to the European Court of Human Rights? Footballers are working when they are playing the beautiful game, and they have a right to work in an atmosphere where abuse is absolutely not tolerated.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady, who always highlights the beauty of her football club. I intend to meet UEFA and FIFA in due course. These international bodies have a chance to work with us and use their global standing to make change. No one is going wait any longer.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): West Bromwich Albion pioneered the fight against racism in football in the 1970s with club legends such as Cyrille Regis, Brendon Batson and Laurie Cunningham. Will the Minister support police in the west midlands and across the country in bringing charges against those who subject players, fans and officials to racist abuse from the stands?

Mims Davies: It is absolutely right that across Government, we stand fully beside the police if they have the evidence and back them up. I have met with West Midlands police about the forthcoming Commonwealth games and its commitment to ensure that the community is well policed and looked after, and this issue is surely part of that.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): As you know, Mr Speaker, I am a lifelong Man City fan and a season ticket holder, so I am extraordinarily proud of what Raheem Sterling does on the pitch and his action on anti-racism off it. My wife and I are also fans of Wythenshawe Town. In January, the manager James Kinsey took the players off the pitch when the assistant referee was clearly racist to one of our players. That accusation against the assistant referee was subsequently proven and he faces a charge of disrepute, yet the club and the manager still face charges for leading the players off the pitch. Does the Minister agree that the FA needs to show more consistency and leadership on whether and when players should walk off the pitch and whether there should be fines for it?

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The FA needs to review its rules and guidance to enable clubs to be effective and consistent in these situations. As we have heard, ultimately we are talking about a workplace, where people should not be subjected to abuse but supported either to walk away or to stand up to it.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the Minister's strong statement on racism in football. I am sure she will join me in wishing Arsenal football club the best of luck in its Europa League game this evening, but will she also join me in welcoming the hard work of the Sussex County Football Association, which takes a strong, zero-tolerance approach at grassroots level, making it easy to report any incidents of racism, carrying out swift investigations and enforcing strong sanctions? Does she agree that stamping out racism at grassroots level is the key to tackling racism in football?

Mr Speaker: We all salute the hon. Lady's anti-racism, and I have to say that I salute her footballing preference. I was not aware of her allegiance, but she is to be commended for her good taste.

Mims Davies: I understand that there is a very important fixture against Napoli tonight, so may I wish everybody involved a safe and pleasant experience? Turning to the county FA, leadership at the local level can really make a change, and I salute Sussex FA for doing the right thing.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I pay tribute to the courage of Raheem Sterling, and others, in speaking out and making clear that racism in football will never defeat us. I also thank the Minister and the shadow Secretary of State for their statements condemning overt racism in national football. However, covert, institutionalised obstacles continue to be placed in the way of local football teams. What is the Minister doing to tackle covert racism in grassroots football?

Mims Davies: Grassroots football has huge power, because if someone sees racist behaviour in football played on the local marshes, they might think that it is

[Mims Davies]

acceptable in one of the main stadiums, but it is not acceptable at either level. Let us ensure that at grassroots level people know that racism is uncalled for and not needed. People should report racism to the club, stand up to it and call it out, and that will make the change.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that support for Gareth Southgate's team united people across the nation because it seemed to represent what we in this country are like? That team had tremendous talent, with all those young new players coming through. Does she agree that if our players go somewhere overseas as guests, it is not acceptable for them—particularly wonderful players such as Raheem Sterling—to be attacked in such a way? Is it almost a matter for the Foreign Office? Should we be making strong representations through the Foreign Office and our diplomatic service to get such behaviour stopped?

Mims Davies: Our football experience, both home and abroad, is vital, and that is where we can use our standing. The Lionesses will play in the World cup this summer in France, alongside the Scottish women's team. The Euro semi-finals are coming up, and the women's European championship in 2021 will be played here in England. We can use the fact that all eyes will be on football on these shores to show that, both home and away, we do the right thing.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Sectarianism, racism and homophobia have no place in football, and some clubs—and indeed the FA—could look to the women's game for good examples, or indeed to my own football club, Livingston FC, where I used to sell the odd pie when I was a student. I thank the Minister for her statement and her bold actions. The FA chairman has recognised the women's game as a beacon of inclusivity. The Minister said that we do the right thing abroad, but let us not forget that the World cup will soon be held in Qatar—a country that should never have got it in the first place and where it is illegal to be homosexual. We must take stronger action against such countries, and perhaps consider withholding teams from going there, in order to send the strongest possible message.

Mims Davies: As ever, the hon. Lady makes some pertinent points, and I know she feels passionate about this issue. I have met representatives from Qatar, and said that when we send fans abroad we expect them to be safe, to enjoy the football, and to be who they want to be. Our fans should, and must, be supported.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Racism in football, or anywhere else, is unacceptable, and I welcome the discussions that my hon. Friend has held with football authorities involved with professional football. What discussions has she had with those authorities about children's and amateur football, as it is equally important to ensure that we teach our children that racist abuse is completely unacceptable?

Mims Davies: As my hon. Friend says, it is important to get this issue right at all levels of the game, and one reason I called for a summit against racism was that I felt that there was no co-ordinated approach across

the game. If we do not get this issue right at grassroots level, how can we expect to get it right at national level? I continue to work to hold football authorities to account, but I think that they know they have a problem and must be at the table at every level.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement. She will know that Northern Ireland supporters were voted the best supporters at the 2016 European championships by supporters from all the other countries involved. That happened for a number of reasons, including because the Irish Football Association and the Northern Ireland supporters clubs have worked together, with a 10-year plan, to defeat terrorism and stop it on the terraces at Windsor Park and elsewhere. Has the Minister had the opportunity to speak to the Irish Football Association and the Northern Ireland supporters clubs to gauge some of the things that they have done to take sectarianism away from the terraces and make football a pleasurable experience for both Protestants and Roman Catholics across Northern Ireland?

Mims Davies: I have spoken about sporting issues with inter-ministerial groups, including officials from Northern Ireland, and I will soon be visiting Portrush, which I am greatly looking forward to, particularly in the week of the Masters. It is right to get into community clubs, which are working so well in Northern Ireland, and to listen, learn and share best practice.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Crawley Town FC on taking part in the Kick It Out initiative last Saturday? What she and that club are doing to tackle racism is absolutely right, and perhaps she will once again pay a visit to Crawley, where she would be most welcome.

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning the Kick It Out initiative, which is heading down from the Premier League and into other clubs, where it makes a positive intervention. Crawley hosts the Brighton and Hove Albion women's team, and it has great leadership across all levels of women's football. I have Crawley on my radar, and I would be delighted to visit as soon as possible.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Children are not born racist; they learn racism, which is why anti-racism education is so vital. Will the Minister speak to the Secretary of State for Education about long-term Government support for a programme of anti-racism education, which could involve the pioneering educational charity Show Racism the Red Card?

Mims Davies: I pay tribute to Show Racism the Red Card, and to all those who do great work in our community clubs up and down the land. It is right to listen to our youngsters on this issue. There have been roundtables with governing bodies to discuss school sport action plans. We need more people across the game, including mentors and leaders from different backgrounds, as that helps to show women, girls, and people across the game that there is a place for them in football at every level.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I strongly welcome the Minister's statement and her leadership on this issue. Will she say a little more about

why she thinks there has been this appalling upsurge in racism in football? Does she agree that Raheem Sterling was right to call out parts of the British media for the way they treat black British footballers?

Mims Davies: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words—if we all worked together on this issue we could make a huge difference. I think social media has not been helpful, as it has been a platform on which people have been able to ply racism and hate and disguise who they are. I hate to say it, but if that has crept into the stadiums, perhaps social media is part of the issue. The Online Harms White Paper mentions a new duty of care regarding social media, because too many cowards out there think that football is a cloak to cover their intolerance. We need no more of that.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Minister for her robust statement—remarkably, she has managed to unite the House. There is a lot of money in football, including £4.5 billion in the Premier League alone. Is enough of that money flowing to stamp out abuse and promote equality, and are the fines harsh enough to help with that?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the money issue. Ultimately, we can put more into this and show leadership, and the two should go together. Everything should be on the table, including heavy fines for people who do not react. Above all, we should show leadership, top and bottom, at every level, and money should be no object.

Thangam Debonnaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to community football clubs such as the Bristol Panthers FC—the LGBT club in Bristol—and the Easton Cowboys, which are both in my constituency and do so much to combat hatred, whether that is racism or homophobia? Perhaps she would like to come and visit them.

Mims Davies: I would love to—I love Bristol. The Rainbow Laces campaign is vital, too. There is room for everybody in football. There is a team for everybody out there, and I am delighted there is such a warm welcome in Bristol.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): As one of the ambassadors of the Cardiff City FC Community Foundation, may I commend the work of the foundation and the club itself in working with Kick It Out and other organisations to tackle racism and discrimination? Will the Minister join me in welcoming LGBT-inclusive teams such as Cardiff Dragons and London Titans, who do amazing work in bringing people into the game?

Mims Davies: I saw in my own local mela the range of sporting clubs that are there for people to join. I would say to people, “Have a look.” It certainly sounds as if there is a great opportunity in Cardiff to get involved at sport at every level. That is what this Government want to see.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: A sentence each will suffice.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the Minister ensure that there is a cross-departmental initiative to fund great organisations, such as Show Racism the Red Card, which is doing fantastic work in my constituency?

Mims Davies: I will lobby very hard. I believe the Chancellor is here and has heard that, too.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister undertake to speak to fans’ organisations, such as Fans Against Criminalisation, to make sure that the route to sorting out bigotry and racism lies in using fans to boot it out, rather than criminalising them unnecessarily?

Mims Davies: We have to find a balance between supporting fans who do the right thing and ensuring we make an example of people who choose to do the wrong thing. If the hon. Gentleman has any ideas on that I am happy to hear more.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As the legendary John Barnes said, if every racist who came to football was silenced, football stadiums would still be full of racists. It is not enough just to stamp out expressions of racism. What can we do to tackle the underlying causes?

Mims Davies: We need to see more leadership in the game. We need more people rising to the top like Darren Moore, who came and gave me his thoughts—I thank him for that—Chris Hughton, Sol Campbell and Keith Curle. We are not seeing enough people getting to the top and being able to speak out. We need to support them to do that and have a mix of people there.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): We applaud the likes of Raheem Sterling and Danny Rose, and we admire the legend that is John Barnes, but does the Minister not agree with me that to tackle racism in football we need to tackle racism in wider society?

Mims Davies: I think the two go together. We can tackle the ills in wider society by rooting out the use of football as a cloak for bad behaviour in wider society. We must not use football and sport as a way to have intolerance. We don’t want it—get rid of it.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that racism does not merely exist in football grounds; it also exists in the boardroom? Some 30% of players are black and minority ethnic, but less than 5% of managers are. What will she do to require the football authorities to address this issue?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. At the racism summit I held, there were people outside football holding football to account for not being diverse and welcoming enough. They know the problem. It is time to change who is at the top, because that changes everything.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Racism and discrimination in football and other sports reflects society as a whole. Does the Minister agree that we need to be demanding more not only of

[Debbie Abrahams]

our football and other sporting institutions, but of our leaders in the public and private sectors—and, dare I say it, in politics?

Mims Davies: We all have a hugely important role to play. I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. We want sport, politics and our whole country to be open, tolerant, diverse and equal. We all have a role in making that happen.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): May I draw the Minister's attention to a game between UK Parliament FC and Show Racism the Red Card that will take place next month? I cannot promise to score four goals like I did in the last game I played for UK Parliament FC, but I hope it will be an opportunity for everyone to see that the whole House is united in fighting all forms of discrimination.

Mims Davies: Four goals? Wow! The hon. Gentleman has now set himself up for that. And who would want to be the goalkeeper?

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): As a gay Roman Catholic of Irish heritage who grew up in the west of Scotland, I am very much aware of some of the issues the Minister raises. My own local clubs, Clydebank, Yoker Athletic, Dumbarton and the Vale, have challenged the community to think differently over the past 20 years. Can the Minister tell me where we are on disability discrimination? There needs to be more done to challenge football clubs to give disabled fans and disabled footballers more access to the game.

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The experience of our disabled fans across the country is not equal, not fair and not good enough. The whole House is listening and the UK is watching: football, give everyone a fair experience, particularly our disabled fans.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): As a Palace season ticket holder, I spend many a happy Saturday afternoon chanting, "He's just too good for you" about Wilf Zaha, as he runs rings around opposition defenders. Does the Minister agree that Wilf Zaha needs to be recognised not just for the wizardry he displays on the pitch, but for the work he does for Football for Peace to unite communities?

Mims Davies: I think the fact that such players still feel they have to stand up like this shows the problem. The fact is that they do, and we absolutely have to support them, as the right hon. Gentleman does on the terraces. We should do that as they speak out.

European Council

1.35 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on yesterday's European Council.

But before I do, I am sure that the whole House will welcome the news this morning that the Metropolitan police have arrested Julian Assange for breach of bail, after nearly seven years in the Ecuadorian embassy. He has been also been arrested in relation to an extradition request from the United States authorities. This is now a legal matter before the courts. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will make a statement on this later, but I thank the Metropolitan police for carrying out their duties with great professionalism and welcome the co-operation of the Ecuadorian Government in bringing this matter to a resolution. Mr Speaker, this goes to show that in the United Kingdom, no one is above the law.

Turning to the Council, my priority is to deliver Brexit and to do so in an orderly way that does not disrupt people's lives, so I continue to believe we need to leave the European Union with a deal as soon as possible. And, of course, this House has voted repeatedly to avoid a no deal. Yet, despite the efforts of Members on all sides, we have not so far been able to vote for a deal, so ahead of the Council, I wrote to President Tusk to seek a short extension to the Article 50 period to 30 June. Critically, I also requested that any extension should be terminable so that whenever this House agrees a deal and ratifies the withdrawal agreement, we can get on and leave. I did this not merely to avoid a further delay beyond ratification of the withdrawal agreement, but specifically to retain our ability to leave the EU without having to hold European parliamentary elections on 23 May.

The discussions at the Council were difficult and, unsurprisingly, many of our European partners share the deep frustration that I know so many of us feel in this House over the current impasse. There was a range of views about the length of an extension, with a large number of member states preferring a longer extension to the end of this year or even into the next. In the end, what was agreed by the UK and the EU 27 was a compromise: an extension lasting until the end of October. The Council also agreed that we would update on our progress at the next meeting in June. Critically, and as I requested, the Council agreed that this extension can be terminated when the withdrawal agreement has been ratified. So, for example, if we were able to pass a deal by 22 May, we would not have to take part in European elections and, when the EU has also ratified, we would be able to leave at 11 pm on 31 May. In short, the date of our departure from the EU, and our participation in the European parliamentary elections, remains a decision for this House. As President Tusk said last night:

"During this time, the course of action will be entirely in the UK's hands."

In agreeing this extension, there was some discussion in the Council about whether stringent conditions should be imposed on the UK for its EU membership during this period, but I argued against this. I put the case that there is only a single tier of EU membership, with no conditionality attached beyond existing treaty obligations.

The Council conclusions are clear that during the course of the extension the UK will continue to hold full membership rights. In turn, I assured my fellow leaders that the UK will continue to be bound by all our ongoing obligations as a member state, including the duty of sincere co-operation. The United Kingdom plays a responsible and constructive role on the world stage, and we always will. That is the kind of country we are.

The choices we face are stark and the timetable is clear. I believe we must now press on at pace with our efforts to reach a consensus on a deal that is in the national interest. I welcome the discussions that have taken place with the Opposition in recent days and the further talks that are resuming today. This is not the normal way of British politics and it is uncomfortable for many in both the Government and Opposition parties. Reaching an agreement will not be easy, because to be successful, it will require both sides to make compromises. But however challenging it may be politically, I profoundly believe that in this unique situation where the House is deadlocked, it is incumbent on both Front Benches to seek to work together to deliver what the British people voted for, and I think that the British people expect their politicians to do just that when the national interest demands it.

I hope that we can reach an agreement on a single unified approach that we can put to the House for approval, but if we cannot do so soon, we will seek to agree a small number of options for the future relationship that we will put to the House in a series of votes to determine which course to pursue. As I have made clear before, the Government stand ready to abide by the decision of the House, but to make this process work, the Opposition would need to agree to this, too.

With the House's consent, we could also bring forward the withdrawal agreement Bill, which is a necessary element of any deal, whichever course we take. The Bill will take time to pass through both Houses, so if we want to get on with leaving, we need to start this process soon. It could also provide a useful forum to resolve some of the outstanding issues in the future relationship.

Crucially, any agreement on the future relationship may involve a number of additions and clarifications to the political declaration. I am pleased that at this Council, all 27 member states responded to my update on the ongoing cross-party talks by agreeing that

“the European Council is prepared to reconsider the Political Declaration on the future relationship in accordance with the positions and principles stated in its guidelines and statements”.

The Council also reiterated that the withdrawal agreement itself could not be reopened.

I know the whole country is intensely frustrated that this process to leave the European Union has still not been completed. I never wanted to seek this extension and I deeply regret that we have not yet been able to secure agreement in this House for a deal that would allow us to leave in a smooth and orderly way. I know, too, that this whole debate is putting Members on both sides of the House under immense pressure and causing uncertainty across the country. We need to resolve this, so let us use the opportunity of the recess to reflect on the decisions that will have to be made swiftly on our return after Easter. And let us then resolve to find a way through this impasse so that we can leave the European Union with a deal as soon as possible, so that we can

avoid having to hold those European Parliamentary elections and, above all, so that we can fulfil the democratic decision of the referendum, deliver Brexit and move our country forward. This is our national duty as elected Members of this House and nothing today is more pressing or more vital. I commend this statement to the House.

1.43 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement. Yesterday, EU leaders agreed to grant the United Kingdom an article 50 extension until 31 October. This means that Britain will now have to start the process of holding European elections in the extraordinary situation of not knowing whether new MEPs will take their seats, or for how long. This has come just three weeks after the Prime Minister told the House that she was not prepared to delay Brexit any longer than 30 June. This second extension in the space of a fortnight not only represents a diplomatic failure, but is another milestone in the Government's mishandling of the entire Brexit process.

A measure of this could be seen in this House on Monday when one third of her party voted against her own policy to request a short delay and four of her Cabinet members abstained. Can the Prime Minister confirm that the request by the Leader of the House on Tuesday for the EU to reopen the withdrawal agreement has also been rebuffed? The Prime Minister stuck rigidly to a flawed plan and now the clock has run down, leaving Britain in limbo and adding to the deep uncertainty for business, workers and people all across this country.

I welcome that the Prime Minister finally decided to reach out to the Opposition last week and open talks to try to find a breakthrough. The fact that the invitation did not even come at the eleventh hour, but at five past midnight three days after the Prime Minister had missed her own Brexit deadline of 29 March, is a reflection of the Government's fundamental error in not proceeding by consensus. However, I can report to the House that the talks now taking place between the Opposition and the Government are serious, detailed and ongoing, and I welcome the constructive engagement that we have had. Although this view may not be universally shared on the Conservative Benches, I also welcome the indications from the Government that they may be willing to move in the key areas that have prevented the Prime Minister's deal from being supported on this side of the House. If these talks are to be a success, resulting in an agreement that can bring our country back together, the Government will have to compromise. That is why it was with disappointment that I read the Secretary of State for International Trade's letter this week, in what seemed to be an attempt to scupper meaningful talks by all but ruling out Labour's customs union proposal—a proposal, I might add, that is supported by business and industry bodies as well as by all leading trade unions in this country. It is a proposal that European Union leaders and the Irish Taoiseach just yesterday said is both credible and negotiable.

Labour will continue to engage constructively in talks, because we respect the result of the referendum and we are committed to defending jobs, industry and living standards by delivering a close economic relationship with the European Union and securing frictionless trade with improved rights and standards. If that is not

[Jeremy Corbyn]

possible, we believe all options should remain on the table, including the option of a public vote. We see no advantage in the proposals of the Secretary of State for International Trade to create distance and divergence in our trading relationship with our largest trading partner.

This House must also bear in mind that after a deal has passed, the current Prime Minister has said that she will step down. We have no idea who may succeed her, so with that in mind, we have to entrench any agreement, because some of those already throwing their hats into the ring have said that they would scrap the Human Rights Act, they would rip up burdensome regulation, or they would even prefer to leave without any deal at all. Some on the Conservative Benches want nothing more than to use Brexit to create a race to the bottom, opening up our economy to US big pharma companies in our national health service and hormone-treated beef on our plates, to slash workers' rights and consumer standards, and to have the UK become a virtual tax haven on the shores of Europe.

Let me be clear to the Prime Minister and to the country: Labour will not support any deal that would leave us open to such a dystopian vision for the future of this country. It is incumbent on all of us now to find a way forward. We must continue to talk to each other, and if the Government are serious, the red lines must move and we must see a real compromise. I look forward to the discussions in the coming days and, even at this late stage, to working to find a deal that can command the support not only of this House, but, perhaps more importantly, of the public across this country too.

The Prime Minister: The talks between the Government and the Opposition have indeed been serious. They are detailed and they are being taken forward in a constructive and positive fashion. We did, of course, offer talks at an earlier stage than very recently, but I am pleased that we are now able to sit down in this way.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue about the European parliamentary elections. Of course, had Members in this House voted with a majority to agree the withdrawal agreement on 29 March, we would have guaranteed leaving on 22 May and not holding the European parliamentary elections. At the time, obviously, he did not feel able to support a deal to enable us not to hold those European parliamentary elections. It is still possible to do so, and we will continue to work on that.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the need for us to protect jobs, industry and living standards; indeed, that is what we have been aiming to do with the deal that we agreed with the European Union. But we have been doing that not just in relation to the deal with the European Union. It is this Government who have presided over record levels of people in employment. It is this Government who have helped people with their living standards, with tax cuts for 32 million people.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the future relationship and the need to entrench aspects of the future relationship. Of course, the Government did, on 29 March, say that we would accept the amendment tabled on the Order Paper by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), which would require Parliament to have a role in looking at the future relationship and the negotiating objectives for

the future. That clearly makes the case that any Government—any Government—as they are going through those negotiations, will have to ensure that they take Parliament with them in agreeing that future relationship.

On the issue of coming together in an agreement, the point is very simple. I am not prepared just to accept Labour's policies; the Labour Party is not prepared just to accept our policies. As the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has said, this takes compromise on both sides, and that is what we are doing: sitting down seriously to find a way that enables this House to ensure that there is a deal that commands a majority, so that we can leave the European Union, fulfil the vote of the British people in 2016 in the referendum and do so in a way that does indeed protect jobs, living standards and industry.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): May I urge my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to stick to her commitment to lead the country through to the conclusion of the Brexit process, and to ignore some of the vicious attacks being made upon her by our more extreme right-wing colleagues?

Given that my right hon. Friend rightly points out that, in the national interest, the next obvious step is to reach a settlement between the Government and the principal Opposition party on the best way forward, will she indicate that it is clear that the minimum that that requires is some sort of customs arrangement and sufficient regulatory alignment at least to keep our trade as open and free as it has been across the channel and in the Republic of Ireland? Can she negotiate that so that it does actually bind any successor Government in future negotiations?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is right that, as we look to that future relationship, we are looking at the customs arrangement that would be in place in that future relationship. We have already indicated, as is in fact reflected in the political declaration, that we want to retain the benefits of a customs union—no tariffs, no quotas and no rules of origin checks. That is provided for in the political declaration as it currently stands. Of course, we have not been able to enshrine that in legal text, because it is not possible for the European Union to negotiate that treaty with us until we are a third country—until we are out of the European Union—so any commitments that are made here will be about the negotiating objectives that we take through into that process. However, there will still be negotiations to be had with the European Union.

In terms of adding to and clarifying what is in that political declaration, and the position of the UK Government, the EU Council, as I have indicated, has said that it would be willing to look at additions and clarifications to that political declaration.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement. What a total fiasco the past few weeks, months and years have been under this shambolic Tory Government. The UK did not leave the EU in March, and thankfully, given the efforts of SNP politicians and others in this place, and the good will of the European Union, we will not crash out of the EU on Friday. What an irony that it is the European Union that has got the

UK out of this mess. Let that be a lesson for Members in this place: it is the EU that has put the interests of our citizens in the UK first—our businesses, our farmers and our fishermen. We should not be lambasting the EU but thanking it.

With the European Union agreeing to a further extension to article 50, the Prime Minister must use this time to hold a second EU referendum, with the option of remaining on the ballot paper. It is now a very real possibility that we can remain in the European Union. There were a total of 133 days between the 1997 general election and the devolution referendum in Scotland. As of today, there are 204 days until the new Brexit deadline on 31 October. Will the Prime Minister now remove the ridiculous excuse that there is not enough time to hold a second referendum, with remain on the ballot paper? Scotland did not vote for Brexit and should not be forced to accept any Brexit deal that will harm our interests. The only way forward is to put the decision back to the people.

Scotland will not support a Brexit deal cooked up by the Brexit-supporting Labour and Tory parties, so let me ask this; yesterday, the Prime Minister ducked and dived my questioning, so a simple yes or no will suffice. Have the Government offered a second EU referendum in talks with the Labour party? Yes or no? Has the Labour party requested a second EU referendum in the talks? Yes or no? Is the Labour party cosying up to the Tories, asking to end freedom of movement as the price for their support for a Tory deal? [HON. MEMBERS: “Yes or no?”]

Finally, will the Prime Minister recognise that she cannot fix this mess alone? She should stop ignoring the people of Scotland and open meaningful discussions with the devolved Governments and civic society. The Prime Minister should start leading by listening and please get her head out of the sand.

The Prime Minister: The Government have not offered a second referendum. I said to the right hon. Gentleman yesterday in Prime Minister’s questions that our position on that issue had not changed. A second referendum has been rejected twice by this House. But, of course, once we have agreed a deal and the Bill is going through that puts that in place, I am sure there will be Members of this House—because there are Members who do support a second referendum—who will want to press their case.

There is not an issue of an excuse about timing. I believe it is important for us to deliver on the result of the first referendum that took place in 2016. And can I just say this to the right hon. Gentleman? If he is so interested in referendums, the question is, will he now abide by the result of the 2014 Scottish referendum? Yes or no?

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend appreciate the anger that her abject surrender last night has generated across the country? Having broken promises 100 times not to extend the time, she knows what I am saying—and she has done that. Does she also accept that this withdrawal agreement undermines our democracy, the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, our right to govern ourselves, our control over our laws, and our national interest? Will she resign? [Interruption.]

The Prime Minister: I think you know the answer to that. I say to my hon. Friend, first, that I do not recognise the description of the withdrawal agreement that he has put before this House. I believe we have negotiated a good deal for the United Kingdom. He references the fact that I have said on many occasions in this House—he is absolutely right, and he and other hon. Friends have been keeping count—that I wanted us to leave the European Union on 29 March, and indeed I did. I voted for the UK to leave the European Union on 29 March. I wanted us to set in train that guaranteed leaving on 22 May. I voted to leave on 22 May. Sadly, a sufficient number of Members across this House did not vote to leave the European Union on those dates, and hence the extension has been requested to enable us to come to a position where this House can agree, on a majority, a deal that we can then deliver to leave the European Union.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): May I thank the Prime Minister for putting the national interest above her party’s interest in rejecting no deal and applying for, and agreeing to, an extension of article 50?

We may now have more time, but our businesses face more uncertainty. May I encourage the Prime Minister, during the Easter recess, to take her own advice and reflect on the decisions that need to be made, and then to decide to put her deal to the British people, so that they themselves can decide whether they still wish to leave now that we know the actual choices that Brexit involves or whether they wish to remain, and we can finally bring the crisis facing our country to a conclusion?

The Prime Minister: As I told the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), neither I nor the Government have changed our view on the need for this House, for this Parliament, to deliver on the result of the first referendum. Let me also say to the right hon. Gentleman that, as I said in my statement, I think it is for all of us across the House to recognise the decisions that now face us. It is for the House to determine whether we are going to deliver Brexit for the British people. We have that opportunity. We can work together to find an agreement that will command a majority of the House, and if we do that in time, we can leave the European Union without holding the European parliamentary elections.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Some car factories in my region are already in a forced shutdown because of the Brexit uncertainty. I thank the Prime Minister for helping us to avoid a no-deal crash-out, and, through her, I thank the 27 Heads of State who supported that decision. Will she elaborate a bit more on her words about creating a forum to establish our future relationship with Europe?

The Prime Minister: I think that my right hon. Friend is alluding to references that I have made previously to the importance, as we are looking at that negotiation on the future relationship, of ensuring not only that Parliament has a greater role in that process, but that we have wider consultations with civil society, businesses and trade unions. The exact format of that forum has not yet been determined, but I think that it will be an important element of the next stage of the process, to ensure that all voices are being heard and can contribute to the debate on that future relationship.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): As the Prime Minister has again acknowledged, notwithstanding her own personal objections the House could choose to attach a referendum amendment to the withdrawal Bill. Bearing in mind the constitutional advice that we shared in cross-party talks a few weeks ago, will she now ask her officials to prepare a timetable, to be completed before the end of October, in which such a hypothetical poll could be conducted if the House willed it?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is aware of the Government's position on the issue that he has raised. As I have said, there are those in the House who may wish to press their case on this matter when the legislation is going through, but let me gently remind him that the House has already rejected the proposal for a second referendum twice.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the Prime Minister take the opportunity to remind the House again that, although the Leader of the Opposition said that he was not invited to engage in talks until five past 12, he actually refused to do so some time ago? If he had not, we could have moved this process on a lot more quickly. Is it not also the case that whatever we may say, the simple fact is that the European Commission has said that the only deal that is available to us is the one that the Prime Minister is recommending to the House?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right on that last point. The question of the withdrawal agreement and the fact that it could not be reopened was reiterated again by the European Council in its decision yesterday.

It is the case that it was some weeks ago that I first offered the Leader of the Opposition the opportunity to talk. We had an initial meeting. There was then not the same level of follow-up meetings and the same level of interest. What I am pleased about is that there is, I think, a change in the approach that is being taken: we are both sitting down seriously, looking at these issues in detail and looking at them constructively.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Until yesterday, the EU was saying very clearly that unless there was a credible plan for an election or a referendum, or a prospect of getting the withdrawal agreement through soon, it would not grant an extension, and that if it did, there would be stringent conditions. In fact, it held to neither of those statements. When it was faced with the unpalatable choice of a no deal, it backed down. Will the Prime Minister learn the lesson of that? She continues to reiterate what the EU has said about the withdrawal agreement, and to praise her withdrawal agreement, but she, and the rest of the Government Front Bench, voted for changes to the backstop and the withdrawal agreement, and the Attorney General, in his devastating critique of it, said that it had not changed the fundamentals of what had been agreed. Will she please examine where she is going with all this, learn the lessons, and come back with something that can actually secure a majority in the House?

On the issue of extensions, will the Prime Minister also bear in mind that the current Session of Parliament also bear in mind that the current Session of Parliament is—I understand—due to end fairly soon? There is some

talk of extending it beyond two years. I think that many in the House, including those on this Bench, would consider that unacceptable.

The Prime Minister: We have consistently sought to change the withdrawal agreement, and in particular to change the backstop. The right hon. Gentleman will know full well that we have argued on many occasions for a time limit or a unilateral exit clause, or the replacement of the withdrawal agreement by alternative arrangements. Before the withdrawal agreement was originally agreed in November, the Government pushed consistently for an exit clause, but the EU did not agree to it then. After the first meaningful vote, we raised the issue again. We sought to change the withdrawal agreement, and pushed for it to be replaced by alternative arrangements.

In January, there was an exchange of letters between myself and the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Council. On 11 March, in Strasbourg, the President of the European Commission and I agreed a package which means that the EU cannot try to trap the UK in the backstop indefinitely—that would be explicitly a breach of the legally binding commitments that we have agreed—and there is a legal commitment that both parties aim to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements by December 2020. At every stage, we have been working to secure changes in the withdrawal agreement. The European Union has been clear—

Nigel Dodds: It has backed down.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman says that the EU has backed down. Yesterday I did put the case in relation to conditionality to which he refers, and there was discussion around the table about the issue. The aspect on which I think everyone around the table focused is that, legally, there is only a single tier of membership of the European Union, and the EU rejected the concept of conditionality on that basis.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister will recall that the Conservative manifesto contained a commitment to negotiate a comprehensive free trade and customs agreement. Does she agree that her political declaration—which has been agreed—and her discussions with the Labour party are being conducted in that spirit? Will she keep going, and try to keep to the timetable that will avoid the European elections? Many of us feel that it is time to get this done.

The Prime Minister: We are indeed conducting the negotiations in the spirit that my right hon. and learned Friend has described, and I do indeed want to achieve the timetable that he has set. I think that many of us on both sides of the House believe that it is important for us to do all that we can to set this in train to ensure that we can leave the European Union before the European parliamentary elections.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We are in this difficult situation because the Government's approach has not worked, and simply going round in the same circles or doing the same things will not solve the problem either. It would be helpful to understand how far the Prime Minister is actually prepared to reconsider her red lines. Is she now willing to consider a common external tariff with the EU—which is a key part of any customs union—or does she still rule that out?

The Prime Minister: Obviously the House has rejected the Government's plan. The House has also rejected the Opposition's plan. The House has rejected no deal, the House has rejected revocation, and the House has rejected a second referendum. At some stage, the House needs to come to an agreement on what it can agree on in order to take this issue forward. When people talk about the customs union—*[Interruption.]* Yes, I am aware of the question that the right hon. Lady asked. I think that there is more agreement in relation to a customs union than is often given credit when different language is used. We have been clear that we want to obtain the benefits of a customs union—no tariffs, no rules of origin checks and no quotas, while being able to operate our own independent trade policy. The Labour party has said that it wants a say in trade policy. The question is how we can provide for this country to be in charge of its trade policy in the future.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The fact remains that we would have left the EU by now on World Trade Organisation terms if the Prime Minister had not extended deadlines. The investment decisions underpinning our strong economic performance in recent years have been taken in the full knowledge that we could be leaving on WTO terms. Will the Prime Minister therefore show more confidence and commit to the House that if this Parliament does not pass a deal we will be leaving on WTO terms—terms by which we profitably trade with many countries outside the EU?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has continued to champion the concept of leaving without a deal with the European Union. I believe that it is important for this country that we are able to leave in an orderly way. He references WTO terms. We trade with many countries across the world not on WTO terms but on the terms that are determined by the EU trade agreements with those countries.

However, leaving without a deal is not just about our trade arrangements. It is about other issues. It is about our security as a country as well. There are other matters that a deal will cover. I continue to believe that leaving with a deal in an orderly way is in the best interests of this country, and that is what I am pursuing.

Mr Speaker: In the midst of these important and inevitably contentious exchanges, may I ask the House to join me in warmly welcoming in the Gallery today the former Speaker of the New Zealand Parliament David Carter, accompanied by Deputy Speaker of the Parliament, the honourable Anne Tolley MP? It is a great delight to welcome you both. You come from a country that we regard as a great friend, and David you have been a great friend to us and to me. Welcome.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister take any responsibility for the fact that she, a Conservative Unionist Prime Minister, signed up to the backstop originally without ensuring that she would get support in Parliament for it? The only vote that went through with a big majority was the Brady amendment. Has she really done her best to get the backstop removed? It must be removed before the House will support her withdrawal agreement.

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, we have at every stage taken this issue of the backstop. We have been arguing with the European Union in relation to this issue. As a result of the decision that was taken by the House, we took the Brady amendment back to the EU. The legally binding changes that were obtained in the agreement in Strasbourg between me and the President of the European Commission were a direct result of reflecting the views of the House. The Government have been clear not only that there is an accelerated timetable to determine alternative arrangements that can replace the backstop but that we have committed to putting money into the work that will ensure that we have those alternative arrangements to replace the backstop.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) knows that my view is that the backstop should never be used and need never be used. We need to ensure that we have the relationship in the future. That is why the future relationship is the important way of sustainably ensuring that we meet all our obligations, including those in relation to a border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The Government continue in office thanks to the support of our confidence and supply partners. In the event that the withdrawal agreement is pushed through unamended over the heads of those partners, will the Prime Minister be seeking the confidence of the Labour party?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that reaching across the divide between the Government and Opposition Front Benches to attempt to come to an agreement on a matter is not usual practice. It is virtually unprecedented in the conditions in which we are doing it today. I believe that it is in the national interest for this House to deliver on the result of the referendum, to deliver Brexit for the British people and to do so in an orderly way. I have now voted three times to leave the European Union with a deal. I want to see this House by a majority voting to leave the European Union with a deal, and that is the work we are carrying on. That is where we try to find agreement across the House.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): I welcome the extension because it provides time for a people's vote, and I agree with the words of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) when he says that it is the only way out of the crisis and to end the uncertainty.

Mr Speaker, it will not have escaped you that a number of hon. Members have heard the words of the Prime Minister when she speaks about compromise, but she still refuses to say, or is unable to tell the House, what is her compromise. What are the red lines that she has set down that she now intends to rub out? Prime Minister, please answer those questions. Which of your red lines are you now prepared to rub out?

The Prime Minister: The whole point of sitting down, negotiating and trying to come to an agreement is that both sides explore where that point of agreement may be. Those are the discussions that we are having. We are entering into them seriously—

Anna Soubry: What will you rub out?

The Prime Minister: Oh, rub out, rub out. I suggest that the right hon. Lady looks at the moves that the Government have already made in a number of areas that have been requested by Members across this House.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Government, Leo Varadkar, Michel Barnier and Angela Merkel have all said that there will be no hard border even in the event of no deal. So can we now put the idea of a Northern Ireland forever backstop out of its misery and work on mitigating an up-front customs union if a customs union is the price of Labour support for getting something approximating Brexit over the line?

The Prime Minister: I have talked with a number of those my hon. Friend has cited in relation to the border, but the European Union has absolutely been clear that the rules of the European Union must be applied at the border in the event of no deal. Some of the other comments have been taken out of context in the interpretation that has been given to them. I come back to the position that I set out earlier on the issue of a customs union. We want to see the benefits of a customs union—that is in the political declaration—no tariffs, no quotas and no rules of origin checks. We also want to see, and this was reflected in the political declaration, an independent trade policy. The Labour party has a position of the benefits of a customs union with a say in trade policy. We are very clear that the benefits of a customs union can be obtained while ensuring that we have the freedom to make those trade deals around the rest of the world that we want to make as an independent country.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister on behalf of my constituents in Exeter for ensuring that this country does not crash out of the European Union without a deal tomorrow. That was in the national interest, and I thank her for that. Does she recognise, in the national interest, that the only way out of this gridlock is to give the decision back to the people: to give them a confirmatory vote on her Brexit deal?

The Prime Minister: The way out of this gridlock is for the House to identify the deal that it can agree and take forward and that can command a majority of the House. It is for this House to deliver on the result of the referendum that took place in 2016.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Clearly the Prime Minister has won the respect of the European Union leaders. It is really important that we have good relations with our near neighbours and allies. It is essential for our prosperity and security. I urge her to ignore the bullies on our Back Benches, stick to her guns and deliver the Brexit that was in our manifesto so well described by the Leader of the House.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. We are aiming to deliver what I believe people in this country voted for: a Brexit that protects jobs and livelihoods, protects our security and protects our Union but also ensures that we bring an end to free movement, that we are no longer under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and that we no longer send vast sums of money to the European Union every year. That is

what we are aiming to deliver, and I want to see a deal that enables us to do that gaining a majority in this House.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am grateful for advance sight of the statement. Twenty-seven leaders decided the UK's fate last night, while the Prime Minister waited for their decision outside. Seven of those leaders represent countries whose populations are smaller than that of Wales, yet we are told here in Westminster that Wales is too small and too poor to have a seat at the table. Does the Prime Minister agree that Wales would be best served in a Union that treats its members as equals rather than staying in this self-harming Union of inequality?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Lady knows well, we work with the devolved Administrations across the United Kingdom in taking forward the issues of particular concern to various parts of the United Kingdom to determine the right way forward. We entered the European Union as one United Kingdom and we will leave the European Union as one United Kingdom.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Following the referendum in 2016, and given the two major parties' policies in 2017, we have a collective responsibility to deliver. The rational, responsible, practical way forward is to take the withdrawal agreement, with a majority, through this House and then move on with the best possible customs arrangements. That would satisfy most people—including, I believe, the majority of the people in Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important for us to deliver on the vote in the referendum. He reminds the House that the two main parties in the Chamber both campaigned at the last general election on manifestos precisely to deliver that Brexit, and that is what we should be looking to do.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Prime Minister, we need to use this extension for a purpose. One more heave is not good enough, and it will not work. Neither will trying to con people that we can have all the benefits of a customs union and still have a completely independent trade policy. I ask her once again: does she acknowledge that, even if it is not what she wants, putting her withdrawal agreement to the public is the way to break this Brexit deadlock and get the resolution our country desperately needs?

The Prime Minister: I genuinely believe that the way to break the Brexit deadlock is for this House to be able to agree on a deal that will deliver on the vote of the British people.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): At Prime Minister's questions on 20 March, when I asked the Prime Minister why she was seeking to extend article 50 having promised 108 times not to do so, she said:

“as Prime Minister I could not consider a delay further beyond 30 June.”—[*Official Report*, 20 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 1041.]

We now have an extension up to 31 October. Prime Minister, how are you going to honour that commitment you gave to the House on 20 March?

The Prime Minister: This House and I can honour that commitment by voting for a deal that enables us to leave before 30 June.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has applied for and now been granted two extensions to the article 50 period. She did that to avoid the consequences of a no-deal Brexit. Those consequences were laid out by the Cabinet Secretary two weeks ago: rising food prices, shortages of food, stockpiling medicine, huge damage to manufacturing and the weakening of our national security. Yet for two years she talked up that outcome, saying that no deal is better than a bad deal. That irresponsible rhetoric helped to normalise those consequences in the minds of the public. Does she regret talking up no deal, legitimising an outcome that she knows is bad for the country and which, through the acceptance of these extensions, she is desperate to avoid?

The Prime Minister: I stand by what I have consistently said in relation to no deal being better than a bad deal, but we have a good deal. I have voted on three occasions in this House for us to leave the European Union with a deal. All Members of this House who wish to deliver on leaving the European Union need to think about how we can come together and find a majority that enables us to do just that. I have voted to leave with a deal; I hope the right hon. Gentleman will want to vote to leave with a deal in the future, too.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Since the first defeat of the deeply flawed withdrawal agreement, the Government seem to have focused on how to make all other options worse rather than how to make the agreement better. Given that that narrow strategy continues to fail and cross-party talks may not bear fruit, what assurances and outline did the Prime Minister give our EU friends on her plan B, such that this latest extension becomes one with a purpose?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—the point was made earlier about the European Union expressing that it wanted a purpose for any extension. I was clear with it about the approach we are taking, the talks we are having with the Opposition and, as I made clear in my statement last week, that if we cannot come to an agreement with the Opposition such that there would be a proposal that would meet a majority across the House, we would move to a means of ensuring that this House was able to vote on options and come to a decision as to its preferred option of what would be able to get a majority across this House. The extension is there to enable us to put that process into place.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): A six-month delay is just 74 sitting days and to waste that on a Tory leadership contest would be an unforgivable act of self-indulgence—for once, the Prime Minister might agree with me. She has wasted the last two years. Will she undertake not to waste one day further by supporting the immediate establishment of a House business committee so that we might have a chance of having a process that is in the interests of the country rather than of the Tory party, with more votes being pulled at the last minute and more game playing?

The Prime Minister: No. Arrangements in relation to the business of this House have been changing in recent days, through decisions taken by this House, but I do not believe that the establishment of a House business committee is the right way forward.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Prime Minister's first extension was based on the fact that we would ratify the withdrawal agreement, and in what was in effect meaningful vote 3 we turned it down again. Now she has been given another extension—longer than she asked for—yet again on the basis that somehow we will ratify the withdrawal agreement. Perseverance is a virtue, but sheer obstinacy is not. *[Interruption.]* Prime Minister, if, as I suspect, the Leader of the Opposition strings you along in these talks and then finds a pretext to collapse them and throws in a confidence motion, what will you do then?

The Prime Minister: I would continue to argue for the Conservative party remaining in government. It is a party that has led to a situation in this country where we see record levels of employment, 32 million people with tax cuts, a modern industrial strategy and 1.9 million more children in “good” or “outstanding” schools. We are delivering for people, and that is why this party should remain in government.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this extension and the ruling out of a catastrophic no deal. I also welcome the talks going on between our two parties, because it is important that we try to find consensus and attempt to break the deadlock. However, I warn the Prime Minister that attempting to decouple the issue of a deal from whether it goes back to the people for their confirmation will not be acceptable to many people on the Opposition Benches, or indeed an increasing number on her own. Will she recognise that the only way to break the deadlock will be a confirmatory vote, putting this issue back to the people?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will have heard the answers I gave earlier to similar questions about a second referendum. We gave a vote to the British people in 2016 and I genuinely believe that we should be delivering on that. I think that, actually, there is a view across this House that we should be delivering on Brexit. The question is finding an agreement across the House that enables us to do that, to get the legislation through and to leave the EU.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that if the House comes together to support a deal in a timely fashion after Easter, there would be every reason not to hold the European elections?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. Obviously, it is a very tight timetable, but if we were able to have an agreement that commanded a majority across this House—obviously, we would have to get the legislation through—my ambition and aim would be to do that so that we do not need to hold the European parliamentary elections.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Whenever the Prime Minister is asked about a second referendum, she is keen to remind us that that option has been defeated twice in this House, but of course her withdrawal

[Joanna Cherry]

agreement has been defeated three times. On its second outing in this House, the motion for a second referendum got 280 votes, which was considerably better than her withdrawal agreement did on its second outing. In fact, if support for a second referendum grew at the same rate as that for her withdrawal agreement, it would win outright if it got a third vote. In recognition of that fact, if the Prime Minister cannot get an agreement with Her Majesty's Opposition, will she include a second referendum in the number of options she intends to put this House?

The Prime Minister: The hon. and learned Lady is talking about process in relation to a second referendum. What this House needs to agree is the basis on which we can leave the European Union, which is the substance of our discussions with the Opposition.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Many in this place and, more importantly, many exporting businesses and farmers will welcome the fact that they no longer face tariffs that would threaten their survival, which is what would have happened if we had crashed out with no deal tomorrow night. To that extent, the Council conclusions are very welcome. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that, contrary to the many voices from the Opposition Benches, a second referendum would not be the end but the start of the process, and that in the current climate it would be much more likely to lead to greater division in this country, rather than the healing that we desperately need?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am concerned that a second referendum would increase division in our society and across this country at a time when we need to bring people together. We can bring people together by agreeing the way in which we can leave the European Union, getting on with it and delivering for people on their vote.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), it seems that our body politic is increasingly fearful of the electorate. We are held hostage to the 2016 referendum and other public ballots. Is it not true that the tone and conduct of us as politicians and of the Prime Minister as a leader of our country are increasingly important and as important as the policies themselves? Is not now the time for us to sit back, reflect and investigate how we can use public ballots to bring people together as a country, not run scared from public ballots, and to understand how we can lead through elections with rigour and a focus on fact rather than division?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the passion and seriousness with which the hon. Gentleman has campaigned and championed, in this House and elsewhere, the concept of a second referendum. Nobody is running scared of the electorate. We gave the electorate the opportunity to determine the fate of this country in relation to its membership of the European Union, and they made a decision that we should leave the European Union. If we were to go back to the people in a second referendum, I think that many would fear that that was a sign of bad faith in relation to their politicians and that could damage our democracy.

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for all her efforts to remove the nonsense of no deal from the agenda. In her statement she said that if the talks fall—I certainly hope that that will not be the case—she will put to the House a series of votes to determine which course to pursue. Will she confirm that there will be preferential voting system to allow the House finally to decide on one solution to this problem?

The Prime Minister: What I have said—and this is the Government's intention—is that if the talks with the Opposition fail to find a point of agreement between us that we believe would get a majority across this House, we would work with the Opposition to identify options and votes to be put to this House to find a way of determining a single result. There are a number of ways in which it is possible to do that. I think it would be important to ensure, were we in that position, that whatever system was chosen was genuinely going to come to a proper reflection of the views of this House.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Prime Minister knows that full membership of the single market is the only way we can guarantee workers' rights and the integrity of the Union and do something for the services sector, which represents 80% of the economy. A stand-alone customs union simply does not cut it. In the options that will be presented to us if the talks do not work, can she guarantee that full membership of the single market through the European economic area will be on offer?

The Prime Minister: I do not recognise the picture painted by the hon. Gentleman. It is not the case that full membership of the single market is the only way to achieve the benefits that he has referred to. He is right that it is particularly important, as we leave the European Union, that we have a care for our services sector, given the significant extent to which it plays a role in our economy. On flexibility, maintaining and recognising the importance of the City of London, particularly in financial services and the risk borne here in the United Kingdom, leads us to want to see that greater flexibility in relation to services.

It is not the case that the only way to ensure that we maintain and enhance workers' rights in the United Kingdom is through full membership of the single market. This is a Government who are enhancing workers' rights, because we believe that is what is right in the United Kingdom.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there are many other very important issues facing the European Union—including, for the moment, the United Kingdom—particularly in respect of the EU's crucial relationship with China? Given the extension granted by our European partners, will she confirm that she will direct Britain's negotiators to use the extra valuable time creatively in relation to trade with China, which when we have left the European Union will inevitably be much harder to negotiate?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that there are a number of other issues facing the European Union, including its relationship with China. He will be aware of the benefits that the United Kingdom already has from investment from, and interaction of

trade with, China. We will, of course, want to enhance that for the future. As a member of the European Union during this extension, we will continue to participate and to operate with that duty of sincere co-operation and fulfil all our rights and obligations.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Ind): The Prime Minister has wasted most of the past two years negotiating Brexit with her own divided party. What she actually needs to do is to rub out her red lines to bring this House and our country together. The problem is that she always puts her party before country. Will she now commit to stop flogging her dead horse of a deal, face down the hardliners in her own party and give serious consideration to a people's vote, which her own Chancellor has said is a perfectly credible proposition?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with me, a former Business Minister, that this country's businesses, on which we all rely, deserve better than this ongoing crisis and chaos, and need the certainty that could be delivered if every Member of this House respected the referendum and a vote to leave in their constituency, and voted for it? Could she also tell me what to tell voters on the doorsteps on 2 May, when my hard-working local councillors risk being thrown out, after four years of really good work on our behalf, for something that they are not responsible for?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of our finding a way through in this House to deliver on Brexit and to ensure that we do so in an orderly way. He should tell voters on the doorsteps that this is a Government who have been working, and who continue to work, to deliver Brexit. When it comes to the local council elections, I am sure that people will recognise that if they want good local services and lower council tax, there is only one way to vote and that is Conservative.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I commend the Prime Minister for the flexibility she has shown in recent days in rejecting a no deal and requesting the extension to article 50 that she had previously rejected. May I ask that she shows a similar spirit of compromise in accepting that one way in which she could get her deal through this Parliament is by attaching to it a people's vote?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier answer.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I also support the Prime Minister's efforts in continuing to seek a resolution to this problem, and I share her concerns about being where we are, but I am concerned that the next time we seek an extension it may not be there. In order to avoid the dramatic consequences of that, and in addition to pursuing the withdrawal agreement as she rightly should, will she be as flexible as possible in relation to the alternatives and, if she is to get a true reflection of the House's view, allow free votes on those alternatives to ensure that we can get an agreement over the line, leave the EU and have the future relationship with the EU that we want?

The Prime Minister: This is the first opportunity I have had to thank my right hon. Friend for all his work as a Minister over the years.

We are working to see whether we can find a point of agreement with the Opposition that would command a majority in this House. If we are not able to do that, we will want to agree how we can take votes forward such that we identify an opinion across this House that would command a majority and enable us, as he says, to leave the European Union in an orderly way that is good for the UK.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): In these negotiations the EU demanded £39 billion, and got it; an unnecessary Irish backstop, and got it; a withdrawal agreement that would tie our hands in future negotiations, and got it; and extensions that go against commitments given by the Prime Minister, and got it. Can she give us any example of any EU demand that she has actually resisted?

The Prime Minister: I could give plenty of examples, but I will give the right hon. Gentleman just two. We resisted a Northern Ireland-only customs territory in the backstop and made sure it is a UK-wide customs territory. He says that the EU demanded £39 billion. No, it did not. It started off at £100 billion, and our negotiations got it down.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Most Members of this House will have at the forefront of their mind the issue of citizens' rights. Although I welcome the Prime Minister's pledge to respect the rights of EU nationals here and the reciprocal rights given by some member states, in the absence of a withdrawal agreement those rights are not underpinned by international law. Will she help arrange a meeting between me, British in Europe, which represents more than 1 million British citizens in Europe, the 3 million and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to discuss these issues?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has resolutely championed the cause of EU citizens here in the UK and of UK citizens living in the European Union. We welcome the contribution that EU citizens have made here in the United Kingdom, which is why we have given our guarantee to protect their rights. We are working with the EU27, which has, at various levels, guaranteed the rights of UK citizens living in EU countries. We continue to work to ensure that we have those reciprocal rights, but my hon. Friend has raised an issue of importance, and I am happy to ensure that he and those representatives are able to meet the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to discuss these issues.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has referred to the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill, which I assume is ready to go. Can she tell the House how the Government intend to judge when and whether they will be in a position to bring forward that Bill?

The Prime Minister: Crucially, we will see how the talks with the Opposition progress. As I have said, there have been further talks today. The talks have been

[*The Prime Minister*]

conducted in a positive and constructive manner, and I look forward to them continuing to be conducted in that manner. Obviously, if we are able to reach a point of agreement with the Opposition on the way forward, that is what we will seek to bring to this House.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The Prime Minister has spoken of the need for compromise, so will she undertake, in the additional six months or so that we have been allotted as a consequence of the article 50 extension, to seek to persuade the European Union of the need to compromise and show less obduracy on the issue of the Irish backstop? Will she explain to the EU that, so long as the Irish backstop remains unamended, it is extremely unlikely that the withdrawal agreement will be approved by this House?

The Prime Minister: As I enunciated earlier, over not just the last few months but in advance of the withdrawal agreement being agreed in November 2018, we have been pressing the issue of the Irish backstop. As my right hon. Friend knows, legally binding changes were obtained in the agreement between me and President Juncker at Strasbourg in early March. Those changes were, of course, brought to this House, and the House then continued to reject the withdrawal agreement. What we are now doing is finding a way through that ensures the deal we have agreed with the European Union can find a majority in this House. Once again, the European Union has been clear that the withdrawal agreement is not open for renegotiation.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The six largest manufacturers in my constituency and the National Farmers Union all pressed to take a no deal off the table, and I am extremely glad that that has happened. When the Prime Minister next looks at the Opposition's proposal for a permanent customs union, will she bear in mind the example of Turkey, which is in the customs union but also has its own separate trade deals with third countries?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Lady that people have spoken to me, both positively and negatively, about the Turkish example in relation to a customs union. In practice, Turkey does not find itself able to have that freedom in relation to trade deals because of its arrangements with the European Union.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I have a timber processing plant in my Ayr constituency and, for the first time in 20 years, it has maxed out its storage and, at great expense, secured additional product storage, all due to Brexit uncertainty. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that these costs cannot be borne indefinitely? Collectively, as a Parliament, we need to get the Brexit deal done to bring certainty to all our businesses.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing home in a very real way the impact that the uncertainty is having on businesses across the country. I want to bring an end to that uncertainty, and I want to do it as soon as possible. We can only do it if this House is able to come together and find a majority for a deal that enables us to leave.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Guy Verhofstadt has said it is “a simple fact” that there is no “big obstacle” to an independent Scotland rejoining the EU, yet the Prime Minister said yesterday that independence would mean Scotland is thrown out of the EU. Indeed, that is what the people of Scotland were told time and again in the run-up to the independence referendum. Will the Prime Minister retract the ridiculous assertion that Scotland will somehow, uniquely, not be allowed to join the EU, despite potentially being one of its richest member states?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady needs to recall the statements that were clearly made by the European Union when Scottish independence was being considered in the referendum. The point is very simple. The SNP said at the time that Scotland, if it voted for independence, could just carry on being a member of the European Union, and the EU was very clear that Scotland would have to apply to become a member. That was very clear at the time of the independence referendum, and it was said clearly by the European Union.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): My constituents welcome the fact that the Prime Minister is trying to work across party to secure a final resolution to Brexit. May I ask her, when considering her red lines, to look at the evidence of the ComRes poll that was conducted immediately after the referendum vote, which indicated that only 35% of those voting leave believed that they were voting to leave the single market or the customs union? Will she do a value for money assessment on our confidence and supply partners, when they are both undermining confidence in the UK and failing to supply votes?

The Prime Minister: When people voted across the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, obviously individuals voted for different reasons, but I think underlying the vote was that desire to ensure that the United Kingdom, as an independent nation, could make decisions for itself in a number of areas where it was previously not making those decisions. What we want to see—what I think people want to see collectively across this House—is us, outside the European Union, continuing to have a good trading relationship with the European Union. I think the deep and special partnership that we have spoken about is important for us, for the future, to have with our nearest neighbours, and that is what we are pursuing.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Prime Minister, today, when the cross-party talks with the Labour party resume, may I suggest that the Labour leader is firmly reminded that he cannot pick and choose the days on which he stands up and defends the Good Friday agreement? Yesterday, at Prime Minister's questions, he was quite happy to stand up and, quite rightly defend the Good Friday/Belfast agreement, to mark the 21st anniversary of the signing of that agreement. He described it as

“a great achievement...by the Labour Government at that time”—
[*Official Report*, 10 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 309],

and it was. It brought peace, which we cherish in Northern Ireland and right across the United Kingdom. But the Leader of the Opposition must stand up every day and defend the Good Friday agreement.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I very gently say to the hon. Lady that questions to the Prime Minister are about matters for which she is responsible. The Prime Minister is not responsible for what the Leader of the Opposition does or does not say, and we have got a lot to get through, so we need it in a sentence.

Lady Hermon: Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I urge the Prime Minister, in the cross-party talks today, to remind the Leader of the Opposition that the Good Friday agreement and the protection of the constitutional position of Northern Ireland and the consent principle are guaranteed by her Brexit deal, which is therefore something that the Labour party should support?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. The Brexit deal does defend the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. We are very clear that we will continue to meet the commitments that we, as a United Kingdom Government, have in relation to that agreement. That is recognised on all sides. We have made those statements clearly within the deal that we have negotiated with the European Union, and I believe that is another reason why it should be supported.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): How difficult is it to negotiate with our EU partners now, when actions taken by this Parliament and advice given to the Prime Minister by No. 10 mean that my right hon. Friend has no choice but to take whatever she is given by our European partners?

The Prime Minister: I think this is the first opportunity I have had to thank my hon. Friend for the work that he has done. The fact that we have made the preparations that we have for no deal is largely down to the work that he did as the Minister responsible for that in the Department for Exiting the European Union during his time there.

Of course, earlier this week this House did vote to require an extension to be requested from the European Union. It also maintained the prerogative power for the Government to enter into international agreements—to have that flexibility. The House has made known its view on a number of issues; what it has not so far been able to do is actually come to an agreement on the withdrawal agreement and a deal, such that we can move forward and leave the European Union.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is good, of course, that the Front Benchers are talking to one another. The trouble is that this Parliament is not quite as simple as that. We have had more Members resign from their political parties than in any other Parliament in history. We have had more Members resign from their posts on the Government side and the Opposition side than in any other Parliament in history. So the truth is, we shall have to go on to the next stage fairly quickly. I would just urge the Prime Minister to do that. Will she answer the question that the leader of the DUP asked earlier, about whether it is her intention to keep this parliamentary Session going all the way through to 31 October? That would give enormous amounts of power to the Government, and I think it would be a wholly retrograde step.

The Prime Minister: My focus at the moment, in relation to parliamentary time, is on seeing whether we

can find an agreement that will enable us to do what is necessary to get a withdrawal agreement ratified by this Parliament so that we can leave the European Union.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for going out to Brussels, standing up in the national interest and coming back with an extension that means we can avoid the car crash and disaster of a hard Brexit? I commend her for opening negotiations with the Opposition. Will those negotiations have a timetable or structure? Will we know what the process will be when we come back after Easter? I think that would give hon. Members satisfaction and an idea of where we are getting to and, if necessary, what the alternative plan Bs are.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Obviously the nature of our discussions with the Opposition and how they progress will determine the timetable, but I am very clear that if we are to meet the desire, which I certainly have, of not holding European parliamentary elections, then of course there is a timetable that needs to be adhered to, so we will need to make that decision soon. With constructive talks, as they are at the moment, I think it is absolutely right that we continue to see whether we can find the point of agreement between us.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Many of us who are watching the Prime Minister working very hard and diligently believe that, in her own way, she has been pursuing the national interest, and we thank her for it. I welcome the fact that, in the national interest, she has reached out across the parties to get this sorted. May I give her some good news? I feel that, having got the delay, there is now a much more optimistic spirit here—in May I will have been in this House for 40 years, so I have a good feel for this place—and that across the parties we can get more good will and really get this sorted. Let us cast aside some of the red lines and all that stuff and come into the room in a positive spirit. We on the Back Benches will support the Opposition leadership and her leadership, in the national interest, if that gets it sorted.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the optimism that he has shown, and for his reference to the positive mood in the House. I hope that we will indeed be able to do as he suggests and find a way through, because I think that the public want us to do exactly as he said: to get this sorted.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): The views of Brenda from Bristol are definitely echoed by those of Beryl of Banbury. The last thing we want is European parliamentary elections. I ask the Prime Minister, even though she has now managed to achieve a longer extension, to do everything she can to ensure that we leave the EU as quickly as possible, as my constituents voted to do nearly three years ago.

The Prime Minister: Getting the terminability of the extension was very important for us. It means that it is in our hands; we can leave earlier, on a timescale that means we do not have to hold European parliamentary elections, and we can deliver for my hon. Friend's constituents and constituents up and down the country.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has now asked this House several times to vote for her deal. The fact is that if she agreed to put it to a confirmatory vote, it would sail through. Is the reason she does not want to do so that she thinks it would not achieve a majority and, if so, is that not thoroughly undemocratic? If she genuinely believes that it delivers the will of the people, why will she not ask them?

The Prime Minister: No, it is not because I am concerned about what the result of such a vote would be; it is because I believe that, having given the decision to the British people on whether we should leave the European Union, it is the duty of this House to deliver on that.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is not it abundantly clear that anyone who believes that a second referendum will bring the nation together was on another planet during the last one?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. I believe that a second referendum would be divisive, rather than healing.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The deal will require ratification by the European Parliament. The current European Parliament will sit for the last time a week from today, and then after the elections it will meet just once in July to sort itself out. It will not really meet properly until October or November. Is an earlier leaving date not actually an impossibility, because the deal cannot be ratified?

The Prime Minister: No, it is not an impossibility. It is possible for the European Parliament to ratify in advance of the United Kingdom ratifying.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): As a long-term supporter of the deal of my right hon. Friend, I congratulate her on coming back from Europe with an extension that does not have the onerous conditions that we were all told would be imposed. Speaking for the businesses in the midlands, may I say that time is of the essence? They are not getting the bank loans that they need and are going out of business. May I also say, with reference to the Opposition, that it is the Opposition who are being blamed for their intransigence and sheer bloody-mindedness in this matter?

The Prime Minister: In relation to businesses, my hon. Friend is absolutely right: time is of the essence. It is important that we bring the uncertainty that businesses are facing to a conclusion. That is why it is absolutely right that we do everything we can to find a way through to achieving a majority in this House that delivers on Brexit and that does it in an orderly way so that we give certainty to those businesses.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): President Tusk urged the Prime Minister to use the time well and her EU counterparts have urged a duty of sincere co-operation on her. I had hoped that that duty would extend to the cross-party talks, but listening to her replies in this place today, I am filled with a growing dismay that she has failed to understand that the Labour party's negotiating mandate has been set out by the members at our party

conference and that it says that any deal needs to be put back to the people for a confirmatory ballot with an option to remain. I can tell her now that those talks will not succeed unless she hardwires that into the withdrawal agreement Bill; she simply will not get a stable majority for that Bill in this place.

The Prime Minister: Both sides—both Government and Opposition—are approaching these talks with the aim of constructively looking to see whether we can find a way through this that will command a majority in this House that will then enable us to get the legislation through. The hon. Lady did what other hon. and right hon. Members on both the Labour and the Government Benches did at the previous general election, which is stood on a manifesto to deliver Brexit.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In her statement, my right hon. Friend spoke of the British people being frustrated with the present situation. I can certainly confirm that that applies to my constituents, but they are also angry and feel that our country has been humiliated. Can the Prime Minister give them at least a crumb of comfort by absolutely assuring them that there will most certainly never ever be another application for an extension? Does she agree that the one benefit from the extension is that it gives us even more time to prepare for no deal?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the support that he has recently shown for the deal. The best way that we can give that confidence to his constituents is by ensuring that, in this House, we agree a deal so that we are then able to deliver on our leaving of the European Union.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister said a moment ago that the European Parliament can vote to ratify the deal before we can in this Parliament. Presumably, during the interlude, there will be further negotiations to change the political declaration. Will she tell me how she intends to entrench any agreements on the political declaration that are made in good faith between the two parties if not by a public confirmatory vote? Such a vote will make the agreements on the declaration sustainable as it will prevent them being ripped up by a future leader.

The Prime Minister: We have already indicated our intention to ensure that Parliament has a greater role in relation to the future relationship by accepting, as we said on 29 March, the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). Elements of this are about the political declaration, but there are also elements that are about what we do here in this House in UK legislation to ensure that we are entrenching objectives for that future relationship. Of course, the negotiation still has to take place with the EU on that future relationship, but there are many steps that we can take here in the United Kingdom to give confidence to Members of this House.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): The Prime Minister's resolve—especially with her lack of sleep—in trying to persuade this House to come up with an acceptable solution to our Brexit problem is to be highly commended. In return, will she continue to

resolve to press our European partners for the only thing that has had a majority in this House, namely the Brady amendment combined with the Malthouse compromise?

The Prime Minister: The position on the withdrawal agreement has been reiterated by the European Council, but of course the point of the Brady amendment was that alternative arrangements should be in place that could replace the backstop. One of the things that we have agreed with the European Union is a timetable for work on those alternative arrangements. As I indicated earlier, the Government have committed funding for the work that is necessary to ensure that we will be in a position such that, at the end of December 2020, the backstop would not need to be used and that, if interim arrangements were necessary, those alternative arrangements would be available.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The 78% of my constituents who voted remain do not want an extension; they just want this business stopped. The ways to break this deadlock are a new referendum, a new House of Commons or a new Prime Minister, so which is it going to be?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that I believe it is the duty of this House—I believe it is the duty of this Parliament—to deliver on the result of the referendum that took place in 2016 with a deal to leave the European Union in an orderly way, and that is what we are working to do.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): This House very much appreciates the Prime Minister's desire to leave with a deal. However, the Prime Minister will appreciate that a responsible Government must prepare for all eventualities. There are Members of this House who do not favour a no-deal scenario because they feel that the country is not ready to leave in such circumstances. Given that we are now in extended territory in terms of leaving the EU, will the Prime Minister kindly give the House an assurance that she has given instructions to the Government to prepare for no deal, should we reach that eventuality? I hope that she appreciates that doing so not only would strengthen our position as far as the EU is concerned in further negotiations, but would mean, if we did have to leave on a no-deal basis, that we could do so with confidence and without fear.

The Prime Minister: It is right, as we have not yet agreed a deal on the basis on which we are leaving the European Union, that we continue to make preparations for all eventualities. However, I also say to my hon. Friend that, in a no-deal situation, it would not simply be a question of what the United Kingdom Government had done; it would be a question of what other Governments in the European Union had done. While any preparations would be made to mitigate the impact of no deal, of course there would be elements outwith the control of the UK Government.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will be relieved to hear that I am not going to ask to dip into her stash of cough sweets, but I want to follow up on something she said to the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman).

The Prime Minister said one of the things she wants to do with the time now available to her is to hear what businesses and the public think about all the things in front of us. Does she recognise that the fairest, most inclusive and most democratic way to do that would be to learn from other countries and have a citizens' assembly?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, particularly given the state of her throat and voice. As we have indicated, we are obviously looking at establishing a more formal forum in which it is possible to bring people together. We have been listening to business, of course, and we have been talking and listening to trade unions and civil society, but we are looking at a more formal way of doing that. Arrangements for that will be set out in due course.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will the Prime Minister accept the very clear message I got from my fellow commuters from Chislehurst this morning, who I think are pretty representative of my constituency? They say she has done the right thing by the country in avoiding no deal, which would have done real harm to their real world jobs and businesses; they believe that, in the real world, there is no harm in seeking compromise and reaching out—in fact, that is a good thing—and that rigidity and fundamentalism do not work; and they want her to have our support in continuing to see this through and have the matter done.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and thank the commuters from Chislehurst for the comments that have been brought into the House. That is absolutely right. I think that people recognise the importance of compromise and recognise the importance of working this through, finding a solution, and getting it done.

Mr Speaker: I feel sure that the commuters of Chislehurst were greatly encouraged to be accompanied on their journey by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill).

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister, three years after the referendum, is finally engaged in cross-party talks, but she may recall that as long ago as the week she took office, I wrote to her calling for cross-party working in the national interest and for her to urgently engage the country, through a national convention, on how we move forward. So with committed Brexiteers like Peter Osborne now expressing concern about where we have reached and the risks of Brexit for our economy and our Union, who does she plan to involve in the more formal forum she has described in order to engage the public in how we move forward and use the next six months wisely to bring our divided country together?

The Prime Minister: We do want to bring our divided country together. First of all, in order to do that, we need to have agreement across this House for a deal that can ensure that we can deliver Brexit and then move on to the second stage where we will indeed be having that commitment both in terms of the responsibilities and involvement of this House but also of businesses, trade unions and civil society.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Given the collective failure of Parliament so far to secure the withdrawal agreement that will allow us to leave the European Union, the Prime Minister is absolutely right to seek cross-party consensus, secure an extension of article 50, and urge us to a resolution of this as quickly as possible to avoid the European Union elections. In that process, the wording on customs arrangements in the future political declaration is likely to be key. I have asked the Chairman of our Select Committee on Leaving the EU to distribute a briefing on this, but could my right hon. Friend also organise for leading representatives of major business organisations to brief Members across the House on the importance of the withdrawal agreement Bill and what their views on the customs union are?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has made a very interesting and important suggestion, and I will certainly look very carefully at it. It is important that Members of this House have as much information as possible when they are making decisions on these matters, and certainly the voice of business will be an important part of that.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I must thank the Prime Minister for having me round exactly a week ago—it feels like six months ago—for a much more agreeable cross-party dialogue than the confrontational exchanges that we have in here. I congratulate her on her achievement of the wee hours yesterday night, or this morning—whenever it was. In recognition of the spirit of reaching consensus that she talked about—we discussed last week how all our constituents just want this stalemate moved on from—I am now prepared to allow her deal to pass, subject to the small rider that it has attached to the end of it a ratificatory referendum to check that the will of the people in 2016 is the will of the people now. I feel that would imbue it with democratic renewal. That is my compromise—it is a big climbdown from what I have said all the way up to now—and I just wonder if she would tell us what is hers.

The Prime Minister: I was happy to have a discussion with the hon. Lady last week. I think that in her question she referenced the need that constituents feel to be able to move on from this situation. I just say to her gently that I do not think that holding a second referendum would enable people to move on—it would create further division.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for all that she has done over the past weeks, days and months, and for what she achieved yesterday. Will she join me in thanking Sir Tim Barrow, the UK's representative at the European Union, and his staff, and indeed many of the fellow leaders at the European Council who showed great good will towards the United Kingdom in coming to this agreement and listening to the points that she made? They are our partners for the future, whatever that holds.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to welcome and congratulate Sir Tim Barrow and all his staff on all the work that they have done. They have been putting in long hours on behalf of the United Kingdom and made a really important contribution to the work that we

have been doing with the EU in negotiating this particular deal. My hon. Friend is also absolutely right about those EU leaders who were willing to come round the table to get that agreement yesterday. Some broke off from election campaigning. One restricted a trip that he was making to Vietnam in order to come. I was grateful to them for that. They are our partners and they will continue to be our partners.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): When, two years ago, the Prime Minister devised a Brexit that reflected the will of the people, I assume that it did not include many elements of Labour policy. If she agrees a blue-red Brexit with the Leader of the Opposition, it cannot, by definition, reflect her interpretation of the will of the people. Does that not make the case for a people's vote unassailable?

The Prime Minister: There are plenty of things on which we agree with the Opposition on this matter—ending free movement, protecting jobs and upholding and enhancing workers' rights. There is much that we agree on and we are working to see how we can come to a final agreement between us that would get a majority in the House.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Ten years ago, European elections were held in the heat of the expenses scandal and many voters chose to stay at home. Two members of the British National party were sent to represent our country despite the fact that less than 3% of voters voted for them and despite the abhorrent policies of that party, which denied membership to anyone whose face was not white. Can I therefore urge my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to do everything they can to resolve this impasse, so that we do not need to fight European elections but, if we do, to fight them with a positive attitude from the centre and not to hand a platform to extremists again?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I believe—and I hope this view is shared on both sides of the House—that we should work to try to ensure that we do not need to hold those European parliamentary elections and we can get an agreement that can achieve a majority in the House, so that we can leave without holding the elections. It is important, as she says, that we do not see platforms being given to extremists.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): When there are problems in a relationship, we encourage couples to keep on talking. When there is an industrial dispute, negotiations are always best. When there is a dispute between countries, we encourage both sides to talk. Why does the Prime Minister think that having a binding public confirmatory vote would be so divisive?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman gives examples of when it is important for people who disagree to come together and talk. That is exactly what I am doing with the Opposition at the moment. As I have said before, one of the reasons I think a second referendum would be divisive is that many people think they voted for a conclusion in the first referendum and would lose their trust in politicians if we fail to deliver on that.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Some 76% of my constituents voted to leave the European Union, and every day that Parliament fails to deliver on that is another day that their faith in democracy is diminished. This is about more than Brexit: a second referendum would be a hammer blow to that faith in democracy and we cannot let that happen.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend speaks powerfully on this issue. As I have indicated in answer to a number of questions, I believe the House has a duty to deliver on the vote of the British people and to deliver Brexit for them.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): In last week's indicative votes, the Opposition Front Bench moved one of their key red lines and supported a solution that does not include a permanent customs union, but instead included a customs arrangement. Now that we are virtually on the same page, is it not time to put party politics aside and work cross-party to agree a deal in the national interest?

The Prime Minister: The public expect no less of us. At a time such as this, when there has been this deadlock, they expect politicians to work together, to sit down and find a solution, and that is exactly what we want to do.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): To date, the Prime Minister has failed to move on her red lines, so has not in sincerity reached out across Parliament, let alone across the country. Our nation is stressed, hurting, dividing and breaking. How will she use the time available to her to bring our country together and heal the divides in our nation? Will she work across the House to do this?

The Prime Minister: That is exactly what we are doing. We are having talks in a positive, constructive atmosphere, looking at things in detail. We have both started and, as I have said, there is a lot that we agree on. There are some differences between us, but we are working to see whether we can find agreement on them. The hon. Lady talks about bringing the country together. I think a first step in bringing the country together is being able to bring this House together to find a deal so that we can deliver Brexit.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): My right hon. Friend is aware of my view of a lengthy extension, but the extension period that she has negotiated ends if an agreement is ratified. What guarantees has she secured that the European Parliament will ratify any agreement in a timely manner without unnecessary delay?

The Prime Minister: It is clear that what has been agreed, as I understand it, is that there is a process by which the European Parliament, as I indicated earlier, would be able to ratify prior to the United Kingdom ratifying. Of course, that ratification could be subject to us then ratifying to enable the whole process to be completed.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Prime Minister seems to have indicated that she is quite clearly not prepared to give at all on her red lines. She said in her statement that if we cannot come to a cross-party

agreement, she wants to bring back a small number of options before the House soon. How long is soon and what will be included in those options?

The Prime Minister: First, I have indicated on a number of occasions that we are working constructively and positively with the Opposition to find that point of agreement between us. As I have said, there are many issues. People often talk, for example, about disagreement between us on customs, but actually we agree that we want the benefits of a customs union, with no tariffs, no rules of origin checks and no quotas. The hon. Gentleman references the potential second stage if it is not possible to come to that agreement. We would be working with the Opposition to identify those options and how to take those forward.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): People want and expect us to get on with the job, and I believe that trust in our democratic system is being eroded at an alarming rate. Assuming that the Prime Minister can get meaningful vote 4 approved, is it still her view that the transition period will end at the end of 2020? If it is, that would demonstrate that we are true to our word.

The Prime Minister: It is certainly my view that that transition period can end at the end of December 2020, and indeed we should work to ensure that it does end at the end of December 2020. Of course, the sooner that we can get a deal ratified by this Parliament, the more likely it is that we will be able to meet that timetable.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): As Easter approaches, my churches across East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow have expressed grave concern about growing intolerance towards EU citizens in the UK as a result of the Brexit discord and extreme right-wing views. What more can the Prime Minister do to denounce that intolerance and reassure our EU citizens that they are valued? We want their contribution because they improve our society for the better.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to echo the hon. Lady's comment. EU citizens make a valuable contribution to our society and our economy. We are the better for the contribution that they make. That is why the Government have been clear in guaranteeing and protecting the rights of those EU citizens. We are one community and we should move forward as one community.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Paragraph 10 of the conclusion says that further extension "cannot be allowed to undermine the regular functioning of the...institutions."

Prime Minister, that is exactly what would happen if we take part in the European elections. We would get far-right, extremist individuals, such as those protesting outside No. 10 on 29 March, exploiting people's grievances for their own interests. I sit on the Home Affairs Committee, and—the Prime Minister knows this well—there over 100 live investigations into extremism, most of them involving far-right extremists. Taking part in the European elections would give legitimacy to some of those vile individuals and their beliefs. Prime Minister, my constituents say: please deliver by the 22nd, so that we do not take

[*Rehman Chishti*]

part in the European elections; and if not, this has gone on long enough—deliver on the democratic mandate that the people have voted on and leave without a deal.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree that we should be working to ensure that we leave the European Union with a deal, and without having to hold those European parliamentary elections.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am sad to say that no matter how the Prime Minister dresses up last night as a bilateral negotiation, it was actually a humiliation for this country on her watch. In the spirit of saying that she wants to compromise, will she confirm to me, and to many of my constituents who have been in touch, whether she will move away from any of the red lines she has put forward?

The Prime Minister: The Government have already shown a willingness to move when issues have been put to us. We have done that on some of the issues around workers' rights, and there are still issues that people may wish to discuss with us. We have already shown our willingness to move on issues.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): May I compliment the Prime Minister on her stamina, and thank her for making the future of the Union paramount in her considerations? The last thing we need in Scotland is another divisive referendum, and I know that the people of Stirling want us to come together and resolve this issue. They want us to compromise and be grown up about this. Does the Prime Minister agree with this sentiment from Liz Cameron, chief executive of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce?

"It would be a disgrace for any of those who claim to represent our citizens if, come 31st October, the same late-night drama plays out again".

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right, and all Members of the House now have the responsibility to come together to find a way through, and ensure that we get this done.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Prime Minister has repeatedly set her face against a second referendum, but she also said that compromise will be required, and that what she is willing to compromise on is subject to negotiations with the Labour party. If that is the case, how can she so categorically rule out a people's vote, and why is she apparently removing that option from any future negotiations and compromise conversations?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answers I gave earlier in response to questions about a second referendum.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Businesses have been increasing their stocks of raw materials, components and finished goods, in order to avoid the damaging disruption of a no-deal departure from the EU. In the process they have incurred substantial additional warehousing costs, and they have tied up capital that

would otherwise be available for investment. What advice would the Prime Minister give to businesses about how long they need to continue with that process?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to identify the uncertainties that businesses face and the actions they have taken in the face of those uncertainties. I hope businesses will see that by reaching out to the Opposition, the Government are genuinely trying to find a way through this, and to do so within a timescale that gives businesses that certainty as soon as possible.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Given that the Government's motion on the EU last Tuesday could attract the support of only about 40% of her party's MPs, if the Prime Minister were to reach an agreement with the Leader of the Opposition, what guarantees do we have that any deal will be supported by her own party?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will see that support for the withdrawal agreement has been growing on this side of the House. As he knows, we are looking at whether we can find a point of agreement with the Opposition that will truly command a majority in this House, and enable us to get the necessary legislation through.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for listening to the House and working with the European Union to avoid a no-deal exit that would have cost manufacturing greatly. Jaguar Land Rover is centred around my constituency, and the loss of £1.2 billion a year would threaten its viability. Does the Prime Minister agree with the Secretary of State for International Trade that a customs union between the UK and the EU would be the worst of both worlds?

The Prime Minister: We are looking to ensure that we obtain the benefits of a customs union that have been identified in the political declaration, and we are continuing to move forward on that. On trade policy, we believe it is right to have a good trade agreement with the European Union for the future, but also to have good trade agreements with the rest of the world, and the ability to negotiate them.

Mr Speaker: We conclude with a question from the distinguished Chair of the Procedure Committee.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): It goes without saying that I look forward to joining the Prime Minister in delivering Brexit in Broxbourne, so can I just say to my right hon. Friend, in concluding, that I have nothing left to say on Brexit—until at least another week has passed? Will she join the rest of the House in having a few days off next week? Before she leaves this place tonight, can she suggest to the Chief Whip that he has a few solid 12-hour sleeps as well?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his sentiments. I am sure everybody across the whole House is looking forward to the opportunity to take some time to reflect on the issues we are dealing with in this House and to do that away from this Chamber. I will certainly pass on his request to the Chief Whip.

Arrest of Julian Assange

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the arrest of Julian Assange.

This morning, after nearly seven years inside the Ecuadorean embassy, Mr Assange was arrested for failing to surrender in relation to his extradition proceedings. He was later also served with a warrant for provisional arrest, pending receipt of a request for extradition to stand trial in the United States on charges relating to computer offences. His arrest follows a decision by the Ecuadorean Government to bring to an end his presence inside its embassy in London. I am pleased that President Moreno has taken this decision and I extend the UK's thanks to him for resolving the situation. Ecuador's actions recognise that the UK's criminal justice system is one in which rights are protected and in which, contrary to what Mr. Assange and his supporters may claim, he and his legitimate interests will be protected. This also reflects the improvements to the UK's relationship with Ecuador under the Government of President Moreno. These are a credit to the leadership of the Minister for Europe and the Americas, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), and to the ongoing hard work of Foreign Office officials in London and Quito.

Mr Assange was informed of the decision to bring his presence in the embassy to an end by the Ecuadorean ambassador this morning shortly before 10 am. The Metropolitan police entered the embassy for the purpose of arresting and removing him. All the police's activities were carried out pursuant to a formal written invitation signed by the Ecuadorean ambassador and in accordance with the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Metropolitan police for the professionalism they have shown in their management of the immediate situation, and during the past seven years.

Both the UK Government and the Ecuadorean Government have become increasingly concerned about the state of Mr Assange's health. The first action of the police following his arrest was to have him medically assessed and deemed fit to detain. The Ecuadoreans have made their best efforts to ensure that doctors, chosen by him, have had access inside the embassy. While he remains in custody in the UK, we are now in a position to ensure access to all necessary medical care and facilities.

Proceedings will now begin according to the courts' timetable. Under UK law, following a provisional arrest, the full extradition papers must be received by the judge within 65 days. A full extradition request would have to be certified by the Home Office before being submitted to the court, after which extradition proceedings would begin. At that point, the decision as to whether any statutory bars to extradition apply would be for the UK's courts to determine.

I will go no further in discussing the details of the accusations against Mr. Assange either in the UK's criminal justice system or in the US, but I am pleased that the situation in the Ecuadorean embassy has finally been brought to an end. Mr Assange will now have the opportunity to contest the charge against him in open court and to have any extradition request considered by

the judiciary. It is right that we implement the judicial process fairly and consistently, with due respect for equality before the law. I commend this statement to the House.

3.34 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for his account of events. On the Labour Benches, we are glad that Julian Assange will be able to access medical care, treatment and facilities, because there have been worrying reports about his ill health. Of course, at this point that is all a matter for the courts.

We in the Opposition want to make the point that, even though the only charge that Julian Assange may face in this country is in relation to his bail hearings, the reason we are debating this this afternoon is entirely to do with his and WikiLeaks' whistleblowing activities. These whistleblowing activities about illegal wars, mass murder, murder of civilians and corruption on a grand scale have put Julian Assange in the crosshairs of the US Administration. For this reason, they have once more issued an extradition warrant against Mr Assange.

The Home Secretary will know that Mr Assange complained to the UN that he was being unlawfully detained as he could not leave the Ecuadorean embassy without being arrested. In February 2016, the UN panel ruled in his favour, stating that he had been arbitrarily detained and that he should be allowed to walk free and compensated for his "deprivation of liberty". Mr Assange hailed that as a significant victory and called the decision binding, but the Foreign Office responded by saying that this ruling "changes nothing". I note that the Foreign Office responded then, not the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice. The Foreign Office has no responsibility for imprisonment and extradition in this country, but it is interested, of course, in relations with allies and others.

We have precedent in this country in relation to requests for extradition to the US, when the US authorities raise issues of hacking and national security. I remind the House of the case of Gary McKinnon. In October 2012, when the current Prime Minister was Home Secretary, an extradition request very similar to this one was refused. We should recall what WikiLeaks disclosed. Who can forget the Pentagon video footage of a missile attack in 2007 in Iraq that killed 18 civilians and two Reuters journalists? The monumental number of such leaks lifted the veil on US-led military operations in a variety of theatres, none of which has produced a favourable outcome for the people of those countries. Julian Assange is being pursued not to protect US national security, but because he has exposed wrongdoing by US Administrations and their military forces.

We only have to look at the treatment of Chelsea Manning to see what awaits Julian Assange if he is extradited to the US. Ms Manning has already been incarcerated, between 2010 and 2017. She was originally sentenced to 35 years. Her indefinite detention now is because she refuses to participate in partial disclosure, which would allow whistleblowers to be pursued and not the perpetrators. Her human rights and protections as a transgender woman have been completely ignored—*[Interruption.]* Her human rights as a transgender woman have been completely ignored, and I hope that Government Members will take that seriously.

[Ms Diane Abbott]

What this has to do with Julian Assange's case is that this could be the type of treatment he could expect if he is extradited to the US. In this country, we have protections for whistleblowers, including the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and others—even if some of us feel that these protections should be more robust. Underpinning this legislation is the correct premise, not that anyone can leak anything they like but that protection should be afforded to those who take a personal risk to disclose wrongdoing where that disclosure serves the public interest. Julian Assange is at risk of extradition to the US precisely because, as we in the Opposition believe, he has exposed material that is in the utmost public interest.

This is now in the hands of the British law courts. We have the utmost confidence in the British legal system, but we in the Opposition would be very concerned, on the basis of what we know, about Julian Assange being extradited to the US.

Sajid Javid: First, I thank the right hon. Lady for her response, but I think the whole country, if people listen to her response, will be pretty astounded by the tone that she has taken. She started by talking about the reason for Mr Assange's arrest and tried to come up with all sorts of justifications, which have nothing to do with the reason. The reason Mr Assange has been arrested is that he failed to surrender to a UK court—that is why he has been arrested. There was a provisional arrest warrant, which is subject to extradition proceedings. Those are usual procedures under UK law. There is no one in this country who is above the law. The right hon. Lady who, we should remember, wants to be the Home Secretary, is suggesting that we should not apply the rule of law to an individual.

Ms Abbott indicated dissent.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady is disagreeing, but she said quite clearly that Mr Assange should not be subject to UK law, and that is something that should worry any British citizen, should she ever become Home Secretary.

Ms Abbott rose—

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady can intervene later if you allow her, Mr Speaker—that is possible. However, I want to finish my comments in response to hers.

The right hon. Lady also talked about the UN, as though the UN had some opinion on this issue. I am sure it was not intentional, but she was at risk of not giving quite correct information, because the UN has no view on the Assange case. I think she was actually referring to the view of a group of independent persons who decided to look at this case. They do not speak for the UN in any way whatever. It was a small group of individuals who came up with a deeply flawed opinion, suggesting that somehow Mr Assange was indefinitely detained in the UK by the British authorities. In fact, the only person responsible for Mr Assange's detention is himself—it was entirely self-inflicted. It is astonishing that the right hon. Lady should even bring up that report and suggest that, somehow, it was a UN view or a UN report.

Then the right hon. Lady talked about the US request for extradition. I will not be drawn into the request for extradition; it is rightly a matter for the courts. Should

the courts deem it correct and necessary at some point to send a request for extradition to me, I will consider it appropriately under our laws.

I note that the shadow Home Secretary, both today and in the past—and indeed the Leader of the Opposition—have defended Assange and WikiLeaks from efforts to tackle their illegal activity. They could have clarified things today for the British public; the right hon. Lady could have done that on behalf of the Opposition, but she did not. Why is it that, whenever someone has a track record of undermining the UK and our allies and the values we stand for, you can almost guarantee that the leadership of the Labour party will support those who intend to do us harm? You can always guarantee that from the party opposite.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): How much has the police operation guarding the embassy cost, and is there any prospect of recovering any of this money—perhaps from Mr Assange's celebrity backers?

Sajid Javid: That is an interesting suggestion from my right hon. Friend as regards cost recovery. Up to 2015—the figures I have are for up to 2015—the police operation cost an estimated £13.2 million.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I too thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of his statement. I am sure his swift actions and determination to appear before the House have not been lost on his audience on the Tory Back Benches.

It is right that nobody is above the law, and in many ways today's actions mean that at least one kind of deadlock has been broken, which is perhaps important, at least from a health and wellbeing point of view. However, at the same time human rights under the law are inviolable, and the treatment Mr Assange receives in the period to come must take place with appropriate due process and with respect to the protection of the rights that the Home Secretary stressed.

Will the Home Secretary therefore confirm that nobody should be extradited from the United Kingdom if they face an unfair trial or a cruel and unusual punishment in the destination country? Will he also assure us that any judicial process here in the United Kingdom will be carried out with as much transparency as possible, and with all appropriate opportunity for review and appeal, as necessary?

Sajid Javid: I am very happy to agree with what the hon. Gentleman said. This country has a long and proud tradition of human rights. When it comes to extradition requests, wherever they may come from, it is absolutely right that the courts and the Government consider an individual's human rights.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): And so this story moves to its conclusion, having cost the British taxpayer millions of pounds, and having ruined relations between Ecuador and the United Kingdom during the period concerned. I very much hope that those relations can now be sustained and nurtured.

Let me make two points. We should not allow Mr Assange to get away with the idea that he was arbitrarily detained, which is ridiculous given that he could have walked out of that door at any time, or the

idea that he had no charges to answer originally in Sweden, because the Swedish prosecutor would have needed to interview him personally, which he never allowed her to do. Those two facts need to be put right in the middle of this ridiculous story.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend has made a number of important points. He referred to our relationship with Ecuador, which is very good, as I think today's outcome shows. Let me repeat that it is thanks to the hard work of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the Americas that that relationship is so strong today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) was absolutely right to remind the House that this was a self-inflicted detention. This was a decision by Mr Assange to lock himself up for seven years.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I am pleased that the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) mentioned Sweden, because the Home Secretary did not. He did not mention the fact that proceedings there led, as I understand it, to the original issuing of the warrant. Will those Swedish proceedings continue, and if there is any competitive aspect between the Swedish prosecution and the United States prosecution, how will it be resolved?

Sajid Javid: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the original extradition request was a Swedish request, but at a later date the Swedish authorities chose to withdraw it. Whether there is an existing or a new Swedish request I can neither confirm nor deny. Should there be more than one request for the extradition of any individual, that will be dealt with in the usual way by the courts.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I understand that the potential extradition to the United States relates to the half a million leaked documents in the Chelsea Manning case. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is potentially a more serious and disturbing case against Julian Assange in relation to his and WikiLeaks' role in the Kremlin's 2016 attempts to interfere with and manipulate the United States presidential elections, when WikiLeaks was used by Russian military intelligence—the GRU—as the primary vehicle to disseminate stolen documents, hacked by the GRU from the Democratic party? While some see him as an information war hero, others see him as a useful stooge of an authoritarian state.

Sajid Javid: I am sure my hon. Friend will appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to refer to any accusations that may or may not be made against Mr Assange. I understand that he has talked about this issue on a number of occasions, including today, on "The World at One". He is very articulate, and I am sure that many people will have heard him.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement. Clearly today's arrest was correct, but looking ahead will he confirm that any extradition request from the United States will be considered by the Home Office, that that will include public interest test and press freedom considerations, and that any court hearing an extradition case would also be able to consider a public interest test and a press freedom defence?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support for today's action. In the first instance, the extradition request is a matter for the courts. Once a full extradition request is received, my Department will determine whether it is certifiable, but after that it will go to the courts, which will have to make the initial decisions according to our law.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Julian Assange says, apparently, that his personal space has been violated. That is a bit rich, in view of the number of people who have been put in extreme danger among our allies.

Sajid Javid: It may be appropriate for me to draw attention to the statement made today by President Moreno of Ecuador. He said that "the discourteous and aggressive behaviour of Mr Julian Assange" had led to his action. That tells us something in itself.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am concerned that a man suspected of rape, which is what in this case actually happened, was able to do what he did for several years to escape justice. I have seen media reports that lawyers for the victims in Sweden are taking steps to start the proceedings off again. I wonder whether the Home Secretary might be able to investigate that and let the House know. I am sure that many Members of Parliament are very anxious about the matter.

Sajid Javid: I understand the hon. Lady's concerns. It would be inappropriate for me to talk about any accusations that have been made, whether from Sweden or elsewhere, against Mr Assange. She may want to reflect on the words that were used by her Front-Bench colleague. On 7 December 2010 the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) openly tweeted her support for Mr Assange. The hon. Lady might like to reflect on the leadership that she is receiving from her own Front Bench.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) is right to praise press freedom, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is an advocate for that, but whatever the shadow Home Secretary says, is it not the case that responsible journalists do not play fast and loose with the national interest and put our people in danger?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend, a distinguished former journalist himself, is right in what he says. Press freedom in this country is sacrosanct, but by and large people who work in the press in this country are responsible.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I find it extraordinary that someone so rich and powerful—or powerful, anyway—can avoid an allegation of rape in the way that Julian Assange has for so many years, costing so much taxpayers' money. Who is paying the £13.2 million bill that Julian Assange has cost us? Is it the people of London in cuts to their police service, or does it come from a central budget?

Sajid Javid: I understand very much the hon. Gentleman's sentiment; he speaks for many people across the House. He asks who has paid the bill. I referred earlier to the

[Sajid Javid]

£13.2 million up to 2015. It has come from various sources, but each one is the British taxpayers, and that is why they will welcome the justice that has been done today.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is right and proper that my right hon. Friend has paid tribute to the Minister for Europe and the Americas for the work that he has done. It is also appropriate to pay tribute to the strength, resilience and patience of the British diplomatic service.

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. In particular I would pick out the British ambassador in Ecuador, who has been brilliant in the way she has pursued this and worked with her counterparts in Ecuador, Ecuadorean Ministers and others, as well as Ministers in the Foreign Office.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in sending our gratitude to President Moreno for his decision. Does he agree that it is right that Mr Assange will now face justice, and that he will do so in the proper way, with the proper protections of the British legal system?

Sajid Javid: I can absolutely give that assurance to my hon. Friend. Today is a good day for justice. The British legal system, our defence of the rule of law and the fairness of our legal system are world-renowned, and that is exactly what Mr Assange will receive.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I join hon. Members in thanking my right hon. Friend for his statement and the Metropolitan police for their effective action this morning. The Ecuadorean President has indicated that Julian Assange repeatedly violated the conditions of his asylum at the embassy. Does my right hon. Friend have any further details of such violations?

Sajid Javid: I join my hon. Friend in thanking the Metropolitan police, who for many years have done an outstanding job, for making sure that Mr Assange was arrested and presented in front of the courts. He asks me about the Ecuadorean Government. I might point his attention to the statement that President Moreno has made today in a video message. He talked about how Mr Assange was discourteous and aggressive. He made a number of accusations against Mr Assange, which were one of the reasons why the President decided, as a sovereign decision of the Ecuadorean state, to remove what they call diplomatic asylum.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would be grateful for your guidance in respect of a matter that arose earlier today at Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions. It concerns comments you made, Mr Speaker, about the planning application in my constituency for the development of a beautiful, unspoilt part of countryside at Park of Keir.

Mr Speaker, you rightly take every opportunity to praise Judy Murray, who I know you fully respect and admire, and you rightly identified her as one of the sponsors of the proposed Park of Keir development. How can I make it clear for the record that there is a substantial body of opinion in Dunblane and Bridge of

Allan among my constituents who want there to be a legacy for Andy and Jamie Murray in the Stirling area but do not want this piece of glorious countryside to be developed for that or any other purpose?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has found his own salvation, and he has done so with very good grace and an admirable sense of humour in relation to what is a serious matter. He is doing his constituency duty as he judges it right.

Look, I completely respect the fact that there are different points of view about the matter. I did express public support for Judy Murray and Park of Keir some considerable time ago, and I reiterated it. The hon. Gentleman has made his own point in his own way, and I recognise immediately that he also speaks for many other people. He has put that on the record in a perfectly proper way, and I think we can both honourably leave it there.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday, you kindly granted an urgent question when medical cannabis was confiscated from a child as she entered the UK from Holland. I can tell the House today that a prescription has been issued for medical cannabis so that young girl can have the medication she needs. Sadly, at the moment there is still a blockage. With the Home Secretary on the Front Bench—I know he is working tirelessly to help us—I wonder whether the lifting of that blockage, to allow the prescription to be honoured, has yet to be done.

Mr Speaker: Well—this is usually used pejoratively, but I say it in a non-pejorative sense—the right hon. Gentleman has opportunistically taken the chance to raise a point of order in the full knowledge of the presence of the Home Secretary. The Home Secretary is not obliged to respond, but he looks as though he wishes to do so.

Sajid Javid: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am happy to respond. It is perfectly proper that my right hon. Friend has raised this really important issue, and he was right to do so earlier this week as well. The Home Office has been working with the Department of Health and Social Care, which is the Department responsible for issuing licences since the prohibition was lifted. We will continue to work carefully, and we will make sure that it can be done as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps I could be forgiven for saying, in the gentlest and most understated of spirits, that having known the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for a good many years, the sooner that interdepartmental co-operation is brought to a successful conclusion, the better. If that is not the case, I think I can confidently predict that the right hon. Gentleman, quite properly, will go on and on and on about the matter.

Sir Mike Penning: And on.

Mr Speaker: And on, because he is a persistent terrier of a parliamentarian. That UQ served an important public purpose, and the right hon. Gentleman deserves great credit for bringing it to the House.

Sir Mike Penning: A terrier is a very small dog.

Mr Speaker: Yes. [*Interruption.*] It has been suggested that the right hon. Gentleman is more a persistent Rottweiler than a persistent terrier.

Dr Julian Lewis: A bloodhound.

Mr Speaker: Or a bloodhound. Okay, we have pursued this matter to destruction for now. I am glad the House is in a good spirit.

BILL PRESENTED

LEGAL TENDER (SCOTTISH BANKNOTES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Alistair Carmichael presented a Bill to make provision about the acceptance of Scottish banknotes throughout the United Kingdom; to oblige businesses and companies to accept Scottish banknotes as payment; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 379).

ADJOURNMENT (EASTER)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25)

That this House, at its rising today, do adjourn until Tuesday 23 April 2019.—(*Wendy Morton.*)

Question agreed to.

Backbench Business

Mr Speaker: On account of the urgent question and the number of statements, I think the House ought collectively to be informed that a judgment was made at a much earlier stage today by the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, in consultation with debate sponsors, that the Back-Bench debate on the definition of Islamophobia, in the name of the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), was an extremely important debate that deserved a proper allocation of time and should therefore be rescheduled. I think that would be seemly and respectful.

Loan Charge

Debate resumed.

Question (4 April 2019) again proposed,

That this House expresses its serious concern at the 2019 Loan Charge which applies from 5 April 2019; expresses deep concern and regret about the effect of the mental and emotional impact on people facing the Loan Charge; is further concerned about suicides of people facing the Loan Charge and the identified suicide risk, which was reported to HMRC; believes that the Loan Charge is fundamentally unfair and undermines the principle of the rule of law by overriding statutory taxpayer protections; expresses disappointment at the lack of notice served by HMRC and the delays in communication with those now facing the Loan Charge, which has further increased anxiety of individuals and families; is concerned about the nature and accuracy of the information circulated by HMRC with regard to the Loan Charge; further regrets the inadequate impact assessment originally conducted; understands that many individuals have received miscalculated settlement information; calls for an immediate suspension of the Loan Charge for a period of six months and for all related settlements to be put on hold; and further calls for an independent inquiry into the Loan Charge to be conducted by a party that is not connected with either the Government or HMRC.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the resumed debate, which was sadly interrupted by the rather well-publicised leak last week, on the motion on the introduction of the 2019 loan charge. Justin Madders had just concluded his oration when the debate was suspended last Thursday—something I am sure all colleagues recall very keenly—therefore I think I am right in saying that the next person to speak in this debate is Mr Stephen Metcalfe.

4.1 pm

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Thank you for calling me so early in this resumed debate, Mr Speaker. I have to say that I had never imagined that I was going to speak in it, seeing as rain stopped play at about this time last week. I am by no means an expert on the 2019 loan charge, but I, like many others who expressed an opinion last week, have been contacted by numerous constituents who have set out in clear terms how they believe it would impact on them. They are being asked to pay back thousands, tens of thousands, and in some cases even hundreds of thousands of pounds that they never believed would be due.

Do not get me wrong: I believe that everyone should pay their fair share of tax. We know that that is what funds our public services, and we should clamp down on tax evasion at every possible opportunity. However, minimising tax exposure has always been a legitimate part of our tax system.

[Stephen Metcalfe]

When looking at this issue, I have been on a journey. Initially I was in two minds about the validity of the arguments presented. Obviously, I had great sympathy for my constituents on both a personal and an individual level, but I felt that the old adage, “If something looks too good to be true, it is too good to be true,” applied. I have now, however, come to a different conclusion. I have looked at the individual cases presented and at the wider issues. To demonstrate why I have come to that conclusion, I want to use the words and sentiments that one particular constituent has sent me. He wants me to do this anonymously, as he does not want to prejudice himself or his case. As an aside, I am not sure that it is a healthy state of affairs when constituents are scared to speak out against a Government agency.

My constituent is a freelance IT professional who was advised to enter one of these schemes. When he entered the scheme, to give himself confidence that it was legally compliant and that what he was being told by his professional adviser was true, he contacted Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. The correspondence my constituent has from HMRC shows that in 2012, when he was checking for compliance under disclosure of tax avoidance schemes legislation, he asked HMRC to review the particular arrangements he had joined. I am informed that the HMRC anti-avoidance group concluded that no hallmarks of tax avoidance were in evidence and so HMRC did not assign a DOTAS number to that arrangement.

If that is true, which I obviously believe it is, I think it is fair to say that, under HMRC’s duty of care and due diligence, it had plenty of opportunity to inform my constituent that things had changed and that the particular arrangement that he had entered into would be liable to taxation. HMRC completely failed to notify my constituent that anything was amiss, so for years he relied on the initial HMRC advice he had received and continued as a customer of the arrangement.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): That retrospective and disproportionate approach being taken by HMRC are what concern a number of my constituents. The people I represent are very reasonable, and they would be happy to come to an arrangement with HMRC, but HMRC seems to want to bankrupt its debtors, as opposed to getting some return from them.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. All the correspondence I have had has been phrased in very reasonable terms. People want to do the right thing, but they feel under a huge amount of pressure.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am sure that, every year, my hon. Friend’s constituent sent in a tax return, which HMRC ticked, approved and sent back. Only recently has HMRC suddenly seen the way things are going and said, “Right, this is some kind of tax avoidance. Let’s get it all back, and in one year.”

Stephen Metcalfe: I do not know what the rules are on my hon. Friend reading the next line of my speech over my shoulder, because it says here that my constituent continued with these arrangements and, each and every

year, dutifully declared on his tax return the amount he had received in loans and the amounts he had returned thereof. It came as a surprise that, years later, HMRC intends to use its newly granted powers—in what my constituent describes as “winding back the clock”—to retrospectively claim that the arrangements my constituent and others had used were not legal, had never worked and that the tax on the loans was always due.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): I thank the hon. Gentleman for making these excellent points. Like me, does he find that he has several constituents who had no option but to be self-employed and were required to enter such vehicles?

Stephen Metcalfe: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. For many there was no option. In many cases, as in the case of my constituent, people had to enter these schemes. My constituent even checked whether there were alternative options and checked the legitimacy of it, never thinking it would come back to haunt him.

I have to say that I do not like it. It feels wrong. I would like to think that I am a fairly reasonable chap, and when I feel that something is wrong or off and does not feel like natural justice, it tends to be true. Eventually, the Government will come round to my way of thinking, or I very much hope so.

As I said, I am not an expert on tax in general, but the charge is retrospective and HMRC failed to notify scheme users of the tax liability. Users sought professional advice or were advised to enter these schemes and, as in my constituent’s case, annually declared what they were doing.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, for some caught up in the loan charge, their circumstances may be the result of unfortunate omissions in, for example, professional advice or, indeed, HMRC advice, rather than a deliberate act on their part? For that reason, clemency and reasonableness should be applied by HMRC.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point that stands entirely on its own right, and I hope it has been heard.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): On giving latitude, does my hon. Friend agree that these cases vary quite considerably? In some cases, it may be about allowing more time for people to pay; in others, it may be about looking at the detail of the debt and whether there is other evidence to suggest it should be less; and in some cases, it is a question of giving latitude on how many years HMRC goes back.

Stephen Metcalfe: My right hon. and learned Friend makes some good points, and I am aware that the Government have set out some of the mitigating measures they want to put in place. I am sure we all welcome those measures, but there is a need for both a pause and a full and proper review of what is being proposed to see whether we are acting in a way that would be considered to be natural justice.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con) *rose*—

Stephen Metcalfe: I want to continue. In failing to act back in 2012, when it had the opportunity—and surely the duty—to do so, HMRC denied my constituent the opportunity to depart the arrangements and seek an alternative solution for his payroll needs.

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend has been so generous in giving way that I hesitate to intervene once again. When he says that something feels wrong, he is on to something, because what feels wrong to some of us is that the equivalent effort does not seem to be put into pursuing the promoters of the schemes, or indeed the employers, and that the entire weight of recovering the so-called tax gap is falling only on the employees. That does not feel right.

Stephen Metcalfe *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman answers that point, I should explain to the House that we have less than 50 minutes left for this debate, for obvious reasons. He finds himself in the difficult position of being the opening speaker, as it were, and therefore he has been required to take a lot of interventions because people have short points that they want to make, but of course this debate had the bulk of its time last week, and I know from what people have told me that what they actually want to hear is the Minister's reply to the many questions that were asked last week, and will be asked this week. There will therefore be a very short time limit on speeches—probably two minutes. The hon. Gentleman has been very generous in taking interventions, and I am sure he wants to finish the points that he would like to make. I have no objection to his taking further interventions, as long as the House realises that that will be the bulk of the debate.

Stephen Metcalfe: Madam Deputy Speaker, I hear what you say loud and clear, but I did want to allow Members to intervene because I think it allows them to get their points on the record.

The point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) raised is completely valid. We need to be throwing the net wider to recover some of this money.

I reiterate that my constituent acted only under advice from a chartered accountant, with tax counsel's opinion, so although everyone has a duty to pay the tax they owe, this feels off. It feels like a retrospective tax grab. We know that it is causing great stress, anxiety and depression. We know that there have been three suicides associated with it. It cannot be right and surely we must have a duty to look at it again.

If I may, I shall quote my constituent, who says:

“Very simply, if the loan charge is not delayed, and comes in as it is, it will destroy my quality of life and that of my family. It may well prevent me from working and lead me into bankruptcy. It has already caused me to suffer extreme stress, and is causing huge anxiety for my family. If the Government ploughs on with this retrospective legislation, it will be responsible for devastating the lives of families across generations.”

I will leave it there.

Will the Minister seriously consider a delay in implementation and a removal of the retrospective nature of the charge, so that it certainly does not go back further than 2017, when the charges were first announced? I hope that he will build on the assurances that he has

given Members who have written to him—I am very grateful for those reassurances—by finding other mitigating measures, so that we can demonstrate, as a House, that we can respond positively and that we are capable not only of listening to, but of hearing and acting upon, the words of the people who come to us, asking for our representation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): There will be an immediate time limit on speeches of three minutes.

4.14 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Constituents who have come to me are overwhelmingly people with their own businesses who took out a scheme in order to free up more money to invest in those businesses, to employ people and to make sure that that business had a sustainable future. They do not object to the fact that it has, since 2012, been found that those schemes are wrong, but they do object to the fact that they are being sought for payments from before that time. The advice they are getting from the Inland Revenue on settlement figures is extremely late. One of my constituents was informed on Tuesday 2 April that he needed to make a settlement agreement by that Friday, when he was working abroad and had no access to his accounts. That sort of behaviour is simply unreasonable, and no taxpayer should have to accept it.

The Inland Revenue has stated that it does not expect anybody to have to sell their main residence, yet it is requiring taxpayers to seek to take out a large loan or mortgage on their only or main residence. These people are often in their late 40s or 50s, coming to the end of their working life, so they cannot take out such large loans on their property, and if they do they are in danger of defaulting, in which case they will lose the property anyway. I therefore ask the Minister to look at what the Inland Revenue is requiring by way of loans on main properties. Does he stand by the Inland Revenue's advice that main properties are not to be put at risk?

I also ask the Minister, and those who are supporting people with the loan charge, to look at the case of professional indemnity insurance for the chartered accountants or tax advisers who often gave this advice, and at whether the scheme promoters were covered by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, because if it was pensions or any other area of financial services, we would be going straight to professional indemnity and to the Financial Ombudsman Service to seek compensation.

The Minister needs to look at the advice that is being given. The Inland Revenue told the Public Accounts Committee two weeks ago, “Among the disguised remuneration users, there are undoubtedly people who have liabilities for years, where under the normal rules we do not now have assessing rights...we have asked those people to settle voluntarily for those years, which they may choose to do so.” Those figures are not divided out and people are not given the opportunity to pay back the loans to the companies that made them. Will he look at that?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. After the next speaker, the time limit will be reduced to two minutes.

4.17 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) and the Loan Charge Action Group for all that they have done, and indeed to the Minister, who for a long time has been given a hard time on the subject.

I am speaking today on behalf of about 100 constituents whose lives have been blighted by this and who have lived with awful uncertainty for about three years. After last week's debate, I met a number of them at the City Praise Centre in my constituency. I have to say that when I first met constituents about this, my heart did not exactly bleed for them; it is not fair for one particular group of people to pay income tax at a lower rate than the rest of the workforce, and lots of my constituents are in real need, living in substandard accommodation and waiting months for hospital appointments, so I cannot condone the systematic loss of revenue to the Treasury.

Bob Stewart: The people who are coming to my hon. Friend are normal people, such as nurses—some of them actually work for HMRC.

Adam Holloway: I thank my hon. Friend and absolutely agree.

My view has since shifted, however, as I have come to understand more about their circumstances. These people are not pocket Al Capones out to defraud the system; they are self-employed professionals who are contracting to different entities, paying their own pensions, without the protection of regular employment, and trying to avoid the complexities of IR35. I guess any of us would wish to minimise the tax we pay, and HMRC knew about those arrangements for decades and was slow in taking legal action, and inept in shutting it down.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the great iniquities here is that HMRC knew what was going on but did not actually do anything about it with expedition and decisiveness at the time?

Adam Holloway: Absolutely, and now of course it is pursuing an aggressive policy that, on any analysis, is retrospective on my constituents. These constituents may have been naive and over-optimistic, but most of us are in no doubt that, for many years, they all believed that these schemes were lawful and an effective means of mitigating their tax. I therefore support a delay to the implementation of the loan charge to allow an independent tribunal to assess the issue of retrospectivity, and, in light of that, to consider whether the loan charge is fair and proportionate after taking into account, first, the failure of HMRC to take effective action for all those years, and, secondly, the fundamental protections that every taxpayer should expect.

Finally, I fear that this policy is another example of how those at the very highest echelons of our Government seem to have a tin ear when it comes to the good people whom they represent.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): A two-minute time limit.

4.19 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for this debate, the loan charge all-party group for its fantastic work, and the campaigners for bringing this situation into the public eye.

Many employees signed up to these disguised remuneration schemes and arrangements in good faith, and many of them declared them to HMRC. The problem is that many of them are now being unfairly caught up in the Government's loan charge. Their retrospective implementation has left many people who were unaware of these schemes with eye-watering bills. That is the case for many of my constituents who have been to see me to explain that they have been unfairly burdened with this charge. They did not know that these schemes were a form of tax avoidance, and now they are being asked to pay back tens of thousands of pounds—money that they can ill afford. The burden of paying it back is causing them great distress, including mental ill health.

One constituent told me that she fears that she will have to sell her home. Another constituent risks going bankrupt, while another just broke down in tears when they visited my recent surgery, fearing the consequences that the charge will have on both them and their family. We know that these are not isolated incidents. All these facts were also revealed in the excellent inquiry into the loan charge by the all-party group.

What is most disappointing about the Government's response is that this scheme is targeting individuals rather than the companies. It is unfair that many of my constituents are being asked to pay back tens of thousands of pounds. I urge the Minister, when he responds, to commit to suspending the scheme for six months and, more importantly, to calling for a judge-led independent inquiry.

4.22 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I rise to support my constituent, Kieran Smythe, who bought schemes extending back to 2014. He believed that the schemes that he was sold were approved by HMRC and a QC.

As many Members of this House have said, the problem is that HMRC has been very slow to react to this whole matter. As far back as 2004, Dawn Primarolo, when she was Paymaster General, said that the Government would legislate to stop these schemes. The Government legislated again in 2011, but it was not until the Finance Act in 2017 that the loophole was closed.

Let me say in the very short time that I have left that the excellent Library briefing that we have been given says that the Government estimate that 50,000 individuals will be affected by the charge on these disguised remuneration loans, of whom only 24,000 so far have contacted HMRC. It is my understanding that if they have not contacted HMRC and agreed a repayment scheme by 5 April this year, they will be liable to a full range of payments and penalties.

In closing, I simply say to my right hon. Friend the Minister that if this debate is to have meant anything, can there please be a little flexibility in how those payments and charges are investigated, so that at least everyone paying them can be fully satisfied that they are properly due?

4.23 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Tax is the price that we all pay for a civilised society. I certainly come from the “pay your bloody taxes” school of thought when it comes to disguised remuneration schemes.

With the short time that is left, may I explain to the Minister, from what I have seen both on the Treasury Committee and from my own casework, the weaknesses in his and HMRC’s argument? First, HMRC knew about these schemes for many years. Year after year, in successive tax returns, in individual cases and collectively, it signed off those returns, and failed to take action against promoters.

Secondly, people took advice and acted in good faith year after year on the basis of that advice. That is certainly what happened in my constituency cases. The Government should be taking far sterner action against promoters than individuals who were misled.

Thirdly, in the way it has conducted itself, HMRC has fallen woefully short of the standards we should expect, both in its lack of timely communication with taxpayers and in the way it has misled legislators in calling for them to legislate for the loan charge.

Taking all those things into account, even now, there are people in my constituency and across the country who face demands for six-figure sums. No one—at least no one from an ordinary background, which my constituents are—can afford to pay them back. People are being compelled to settle now, while the situation is under active consideration by parliamentarians. When we look at how many MPs have signed the early-day motion and the letter to the Minister, it is clear that this policy no longer commands the support of the majority in this House.

4.25 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I have met constituents and seen copious documentation that they have brought me that reinforces everything that has been said by every other hon. Member in the Chamber, in particular about the good faith in which people entered into these schemes, the lassitude with which Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs originally pursued the matter, and the arbitrary way in which it acted thereafter. I endorse the calls for a pause to the scheme, for an independent inquiry and for the retrospective element to be removed. It simply is not just.

There is an old legal saying—perhaps you recall it, Madam Deputy Speaker—that he who comes to equity must have clean hands. The person who seeks the redress of the courts must have acted in good faith. I fear the Revenue has not acted in good faith in this matter, with my constituents or with taxpayers generally. There is an aggressive attitude towards tax collection that has gone beyond the bounds of fairness.

The other legal observation I make is that of Mrs Justice Whipple, who said in a Revenue case in 2015 that HMRC’s primary duty—to collect tax—is not

“a trump card which prevails over all other considerations.”

Instead, she said, it is

“a broad duty, exercised by means of a wide managerial discretion, within which is embedded the obligation to treat taxpayers fairly”.

My constituents, as taxpayers, saw years go by in which the Revenue had the opportunity to raise its concerns about these schemes with them but did nothing. Their bills therefore ran up, and then, suddenly, they were hit with arbitrary figures. They have not been treated fairly by the Revenue in this case, and we look to the Minister to put that right.

4.27 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): My constituents who have been badly affected by the loan charge are not wealthy people, and they were doing only what their advisers and employers encouraged and perhaps even coerced them to do. They had no reason to doubt the validity of the advice they received, and they were led to believe that everything was above board and within the law. They are now being asked to pay tax for periods a long time ago, when their financial circumstances were very different and for which they thought the slate had been wiped clean, which is imposing very worrying burdens.

I shall make three brief observations. First, in my constituency, it appears that those working in particular sectors have been hit hard by the loan charge. That is particularly true of those working in IT and in the North sea oil and gas sectors, both of which used to be considerably more attractive, with better pay available than is the case today.

Secondly, it strikes me as both wrong and inherently unjust that HMRC is seeking tax payments from a group of people, many of whom are not well off and are really struggling to get by, yet it is not pursuing those client organisations, agencies and umbrella groups that benefited from setting up these arrangements and actually encouraged and coerced people to enter them in the first place.

Thirdly, a great deal has been said about the retrospective nature of these charges, which change the tax position for past years right back to 1999. In the two sectors I mentioned—IT and oil and gas—job prospects were considerably better at the start of the millennium than they are now. I know the Minister well, and he is someone for whom I have great regard and respect, but I urge him to pause, listen and review.

4.28 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Before the sitting was suspended last week, I listened with interest to over two hours of debate on this, so I know that the arguments have been well made and we will review them again.

One thing that those arguments have in common is that they concern people who genuinely entered into these schemes under the impression that everything was above board, based on what they believed to be good and sound advice from accountants, advisers and banks. These people were, in many cases, entrepreneurial, self-employed individuals. It is important to stress that, as far as they were concerned, they were not employees and so did not gain from the security of the benefits that come with most forms of employment such as sick pay or holiday pay. To all intents and purposes, they were simply self-employed.

[*Mary Robinson*]

I urge the Minister to consider putting the loan charge on hold and to consider an independent inquiry. It is important that before we do so, we reflect on the way that things have been changed. I recognise the changes that have been made by HMRC, which now targets the promoters of tax avoidance schemes rather than the individuals who entered into them under the impression that they were legitimate. I would argue that there is a better case for pursuing those who promote these schemes. This approach is successful. Only two weeks ago, HMRC won a legal case against a tax avoidance scheme provider, Hyrax Resourcing Ltd, collecting £40 million in unpaid tax. As I understand it, Hyrax users were paid just enough to comply with the minimum wage, with the rest of their income made up of loans that were transferred to an offshore trust in Jersey.

This is an important development, because it now contrasts with the way in which we were approaching the matter previously. We are now approaching it through the promoters and closing things down in the legitimate way that we should expect. That is the right way to do it. That is important for the people who have been pursued, going back 10 or 20 years, and who want to see that the process is done in the right way. We should put this on hold now.

4.31 pm

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): What can I say in two minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker? Well, I will do my best.

I am a person who is naturally a bit cynical when constituents come to see me and I try to see both sides of the story, but in this case I had more than 160 constituents in the group in Watford to do with the loan charge. I commend Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs—rather like the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George), I sometimes still call it the Inland Revenue—for its efforts to deal with tax evasion, but it seems to me that in this case it is not tax evasion. These were schemes put forward by accountants and schemes where people took on employment and were told that that was the way they had to do it.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that action should be taken against the employers who forced these people into these schemes and the financial advisers who sold them the schemes in the first place? I have had lots of constituents on at me about that. [*Interruption.*]

Richard Harrington: My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) says, "Spot on." I too fully accept the validity of the hon. Gentleman's intervention.

Clearly, these schemes were not correct. The way to deal with this is to say that if people went into this because they were reasonably advised to, or told to by their employers, then even if they are liable, HMRC should have the flexibility, on a humanitarian and a mitigation basis, to say, for example, that the money should be paid back over a lengthy period—monthly, quarterly or whatever. I am sure that HMRC does not wish to bankrupt people, ruining their lives and so on.

My right hon. Friend the Minister is himself a man experienced in business who is very aware of the ways of the world. I am sure that he knows the difference between criminal tax evaders and people like my constituents in Watford and other hon. Members' constituents. Because of that difference, HMRC should have the flexibility to deal in a humanitarian way with these unfortunate people.

4.33 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If there is an inquiry into this matter, as I hope there will be, I would be surprised if it were not found that the whole issue boils down to a single, simple question—were people who were using these avoidance schemes and openly reporting them to the taxman adequately warned at the time by HMRC that such schemes were not approved and might lead to heavy future bills? If they were warned yet chose to proceed, they have only themselves to blame for continuing to use such schemes after the warning was given, but if they were not warned at all, then HMRC cannot reasonably expect to recover any tax whatsoever from them.

4.34 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have huge sympathy with my constituents caught by loan charge repayments, because they are normal honest people who thought they were doing the right thing. They had no intention of diddling the taxation system.

Most people who owe loan charge repayments accept that they are now liable to pay that tax back. What I find unacceptable is the amount of interest that is heaped on that tax requirement. My plea to the Minister—as he knows, because I have spoken to him separately about this—is to reconsider the interest charges. In my view, they are far too high and, as a decent gesture—because these people did act decently—the interest charges should be dropped entirely. Such a move would go a long way to lessen concerns among my constituents, and it would be a fair way to proceed, bearing in mind HMRC's lack of warning to participants in loan schemes.

4.35 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to sum up in this debate. Even without the request for brevity, I do not think my voice would last much longer than the few minutes that I have.

I do not know if the sponsors of the motion intend to divide the House tonight, but I think that would be a mistake. Everyone would support it, with the possible exception of the Minister. We have heard rumours that they will artificially force a Division, but I am not sure that this is the right occasion to do that.

Last week, the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) reminded us that three of the main tenets of a tax system are certainty, fairness and convenience. Another one is that tax has to be mandatory. If it is too easy to dodge the tax, it will not work. There is a distinction, which a recent speaker highlighted, between the vast majority of the 50,000 people we are talking about—who may have been naive or made the mistake of trusting their professional advisers too much, and who may be mildly culpable but certainly were not culpable to the extent that they deserve to go through

the stress that they are going through now—and a fairly small number of people who knew what they were doing. They are probably hiding at the back now, hoping that the justifiable cases will get some sort of dispensation and they can go through on their coat-tails. One of the criticisms of HMRC in the past has been that it has not distinguished between the people who made mistakes—who maybe took a bit of a chance, not really understanding what they were doing—and those who went into this with their eyes open and the deliberate intention of dodging substantial amounts of tax. That has to include the promoters and employers of the schemes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), in his opening comments last week, pointed out that many of the companies that are most culpable have conveniently been wound up. The people who set them up have not been wound up. They are still there and they can still be traced. They are running similar schemes in similar companies. One of the things that the independent inquiry that is clearly needed should be able to do is to look into whether there is a case for lifting the usual veil that separates limited companies from those who run them. If company directors are found guilty of personal misconduct, sometimes they can be held liable for the wrongdoings of the company, despite the fact that legally they are two different persons. That may have to be looked at on this occasion.

Three questions have to be asked. This is quite a task for HMRC because I want it to do this for each one of the 50,000 people, so that each case is looked at on its merits. First, was the tax liability properly and legally established at the time? In many of the cases we are talking about, that may have been the case. Secondly, did HMRC take reasonable and intelligent steps to identify and notify the debt and to attempt to recover it at the time? In many other civil debt cases, if the person who is owed the money does nothing about it for years and then tries to claim the money with interest, it is time-barred and they cannot do it. Why is HMRC not subject to the same restriction?

Finally, and most importantly, is HMRC taking recovery action now that is fair, proportionate and reasonable, given the individual circumstances of the person they are pursuing? In many of the cases we have heard about today and even more so last week, there is a serious question to be asked there. I am not asking whether HMRC is acting within its legal powers; I am asking whether it is acting fairly and reasonably. Sometimes HMRC's powers do not require it to act reasonably and fairly.

Actions need to be suspended so that the issue can be sorted out. At this stage, I cannot support a full amnesty because an inquiry would identify the people who should be held to account and who should pay back substantial amounts of back tax. I cannot support the full wording of the early-day motion on an immediate amnesty, but that may change once we have dealt with the people who set up the companies—not those who were on £30,000 a year, like most of the cases we are talking about—and were raking in profits of millions of pounds and paying heehaw in tax. They are the people HMRC should be going for. If HMRC did that, the amount of money recovered would be a significant proportion of the total for which we are now pursuing 70 of my constituents and 50,000 of our constituents collectively.

4.39 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I will not have time to take interventions, so the House will have to forgive me for that. I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) for bringing this matter to the House's attention. I will not reiterate the points made in the many contributions to the debate today, and I hope that last week's thoughtful contributions have given the Financial Secretary to the Treasury pause for thought.

Labour believes that it is necessary to take action against all forms of tax avoidance and evasion. We stood on a manifesto that included a tax transparency and enforcement programme, and we continue to stand against schemes of this nature in their many forms. HMRC estimates that 50,000 individuals have not paid the proper taxation as a result of disguised remuneration schemes, of which there could be up to 250 variations. As of the start of this year, roughly half of those affected—27,000 people, as has been said—had registered with HMRC to correct their tax affairs. However, the Loan Charge Action Group estimates that up to 100,000 might be affected. Will the Minister clarify that?

What plans do the Government have to undertake a distributional analysis of the impact of the loan charge? Labour raised that matter through an amendment to the last Finance Bill, which was sadly rejected. It is vital to note that many of those concerned were encouraged by other parties to enter into a disguised remuneration scheme, sometimes even by their own employers, as has been made clear. We do not believe that the Government have done enough to pursue third parties who promoted such schemes. They must surely take a share of responsibility in many cases for what took place.

The report published by the Government suggested that only 10 organisations are facing legal action for promoting the use of such schemes. That seems a small number compared with the 50,000 individuals being chased. Why so few? I note also that only one and half pages of the 56-page report was dedicated to action against organisations promoting DR schemes, which is telling in itself. The Government have taken steps to allow those affected by the loan charge to repay their tax over a set period, with those earning £50,000 or less being granted up to five years to settle their affairs and those earning £30,000 or less getting up to seven years. What evidence was used to agree that period? If we knew more about the distributional impact of the loan charge, as Labour has repeatedly suggested we should, we would know whether that was manageable for individuals. Given the extreme stress that the loan charge is causing, have the Government nevertheless considered looking at extending that period to allow a more gradual payment? That would ensure that the full tax owed could be returned to HMRC in a manner that did not weigh too heavily on individuals. Has the Minister explored that option?

I would like to raise a point first made by Ray McCann of the Chartered Institute of Taxation to the Treasury Sub-Committee in December. He pointed out that the charge might be applied to those who had previously notified HMRC of their use of the scheme through the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes, but HMRC did not follow up on the disclosure—a point raised by many others. In the evidence session, Mr McCann suggested that that might leave the Government in murky legal territory when trying to apply the loan

[Peter Dowd]

charge to individuals who had disclosed and included a DOTAS number on their tax returns. The review published last week seemed to suggest that a minority of cases were affected and rejected the assertion that legal issues may arise here. Can the Minister comment on that and say whether any action has been taken to rectify what seems to be a failure of HMRC to investigate DOTAS in some cases?

Will the Minister also comment on the impact of cuts to HMRC staffing and the loss of expertise on its ability to deal with such cases quickly in advance of the deadline? HMRC has lost 1,274 staff since March 2018 and 15,637 since 2010. This is a point that I have repeatedly asked about. Even the Government's own review conceded that many individuals who have come forward to HMRC to have their cases settled have not been dealt with at all yet, or have waited a long time for a response. Does the Minister not accept that once again we are seeing the fault lines in the Government's programme of HMRC retraction? This is clearly an issue of huge importance to those facing a significant increase to their tax bill, and the Government must act quickly, following recent events and their impact on people. I do not impugn the Financial Secretary to the Treasury in any way, but the Government could provide more comfort and certainty for those now facing significant additional financial pressures as a result of the charge.

It is important that the Government act to recoup tax owed, notwithstanding the many concerns raised by Members about constituents' individual circumstances, but a blanket approach is not appropriate. We cannot have a tax system that, as one Member suggested, is based or run on instinct. I expect the Financial Secretary knows well that people are deeply concerned about this issue, and I am sure he will respond as constructively and positively as he can, given the many concerns raised by Members.

4.45 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I welcome the return of this debate, which was so interestingly interrupted by rain—I think that is about the only matter raised for which I have not been blamed at some point, as it was an act of God. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) on securing the debate, and I thank all those who have participated, both today and last week.

Perhaps I can try to find the one element of consensus that unites Members on both sides of the House. Most speakers have referred to the fact that they have no time for aggressive and contrived tax avoidance, and they are right. Every amount of tax avoided in such a way means more tax for other taxpayers to find, or less funding for our vital public services.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mel Stride: I am afraid I will not. I want to make progress, as there is a lot to cover and little time.

For the benefit of the House, let me set out the heart of how these schemes work, so that we are clear on that point. An employer can engage an employee and pay them in the normal way, by way of earnings, in which

case national insurance for the employer and the employee is due. Income tax must also be paid by the employee. Alternatively, they can use a loan scheme, which generally works like this: instead of the employer paying the employee in the way I have described, money is sent out to a low or no-tax tax haven, and placed in a trust. That money then comes from the trust back to the United Kingdom, where it is treated as a loan, even though there is no intention of ever settling that loan or paying it off. Because that money it is treated as a loan, it is claimed that it does not incur any national insurance or income tax because it is not earnings.

When confronted with the reality of how these schemes work, most people would say that that is not right. That brings me on to one of the most commonly held misconceptions about these schemes and the loan charge, which is that the loan charge is retrospective. There was never a time in the history of our country where the model for payment that I have just outlined has ever been correct within the tax rules of any previous year. That is a simple fact.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mel Stride: I will not give way just yet. My second point is that the very nature of this means of payment, of tax avoidance, is that it involves a loan that is still outstanding—those loans are still outstanding today, at this very moment, for any schemes that still persist. It is a simple fact that most people, including the 99.8% of the tax-paying public who did not go anywhere near these schemes, would have concluded that if something looked too good to be true, it probably was too good to be true.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The Minister is generous in giving way. In my constituency, 140 people are affected, largely in the oil and gas sector. Oil and gas employers encouraged people to enter these schemes. Does the Minister agree that companies in that sector should be held to account, as should employers and the people who sold the schemes?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I will come on, in the limited time I have, to deal with both employers and promoters, as those are very important aspects too.

When it comes to retrospection the other important point is that, contrary to the suggestion many right hon. and hon. Members have made that this issue has just suddenly appeared and HMRC has just started to address these scheme, it has been taken through the courts over countless years. In 2004, Dawn Primarolo, who was referred to earlier in this debate, was instrumental in bringing in the DOTAS legislation upon which recent cases have been concluded in HMRC's favour. There has been a concerted effort by HMRC over many, many years to clamp down on these particular arrangements.

Some of the other misinformation includes the idea that thousands upon thousands of taxpayers are about to be made bankrupt. HMRC very, very rarely has a situation where somebody is placed in bankruptcy. That is not right for the individual and it is not right for our tax collecting authority. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) gave several examples last week of where he had accompanied

his constituents and got involved with their tax affairs and their dealings with HMRC. In each case, as he was able to state, a fair and reasonable settlement was entered into. That is the main thrust of HMRC's approach.

It has also been suggested that people will lose their home as a consequence of the loan charge. It could not be clearer: HMRC has publicly stated that nobody will lose their primary residence as a consequence of settling their loan charge liability. On the point my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) raised about employers and individuals, it has been assumed widely in this debate that the vast majority of those impacted by these measures are individuals. That is not the case. Of the 6,000 settlements to date and the £1 billion that has been brought in, 85% by value has come from employers, not employees. In the first instance, HMRC will go to the employer, not the employee.

The issue of promoters is extremely important and, quite rightly, a number of right hon. and hon. Members have raised it. I want to make it clear that HMRC is cracking down on the unscrupulous promoters who sell these schemes. In fact, it is currently investigating more than 100 promoters and others involved in the promotion of tax avoidance. That includes promoters of disguised remuneration schemes. In recent years, HMRC has also litigated a number of cases of failure to disclose under DOTAS, which came in in 2004—not recently—and several recent decisions in cases on disguised remuneration have been found in HMRC's favour. HMRC has also made successful complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority in relation to DR schemes to stop promoters making misleading claims about the arrangements they are selling. Just two weeks ago, HMRC announced that it had won a legal case against a loan scheme avoidance promoter, Hyrax Resourcing, which will help HMRC to collect over £40 million in unpaid tax. For the reasons I have set out, it would not be right to delay these arrangements.

Let me turn now to two particularly important issues that many Members have raised, first on the affordability of payment arrangements. Let me be very clear: it is never the intention of HMRC to bankrupt anyone who comes forward in good faith to agree a manageable payment plan. I can confirm that HMRC is authorised to agree tailored repayment plans for those affected by the loan charge based on ability to pay. Where tax is payable under self-assessment, payment will of course not be due until January 2020. There is also no maximum repayment period, and plans of 10 years or more can be put in place where required. Further, I can announce today that HMRC is now forming a dedicated team focused solely on agreeing these manageable payment arrangements for those due to pay the tax they owe by way of the loan charge.

Mr Vara: Will the Minister give way?

Mel Stride: I have no time, I'm sorry.

The second very important matter I would like to address is the interaction between vulnerable people and HMRC regarding disguised remuneration and the loan charge, including where there are mental health issues. Let me make it clear that wherever HMRC is engaging with vulnerable people, it will do everything it can to ensure that they have all the support they need. This support includes a helpline that is dedicated solely

to looking after loan charge customers, with a team fully trained to identify those who may be vulnerable and to provide appropriate support. Where necessary, HMRC will always refer individuals to the right external sources of support.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Before the Minister moves on, will he give way?

Mel Stride: I have little time and I must cover the ground. HMRC also has a vulnerable customers team available to provide specialist, one-to-one support for vulnerable customers in need of it. Today, I can confirm that HMRC will be expanding its specialist service for customers with additional needs so that it will include anyone who finds their tax affairs under scrutiny. As we roll out that additional support, we will start with those affected by the loan charge as our first priority.

I appreciate that facing any tax bill is unwelcome, but it is only right that we deal with disguised remuneration. When we fail to do so, we are effectively saying to the 99.8% of taxpayers who have not been involved in these schemes that we expect them to pay more, and we deny our vital public services—our nurses, teachers, doctors, police and many others—the funding that they deserve.

4.56 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to reschedule this very important debate delayed due to the leaky roof. I have to admit, it was the first time in my life that I nearly became a Tory wet, but thankfully, that did not happen.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): A Tory wet!

Ross Thomson: Thankfully, I am not.

I thank all colleagues who have contributed to and participated in this debate, which has now taken place over two days. There were far too many colleagues to name individually in the time that is allowed to me, but what this has shown is a great display of cross-party working and cross-party consensus. At times like this Parliament shows itself at its very best, and I hope this goes some way to restoring some public trust in politicians and in Parliament. It has been clear from all the contributions that there has been unanimous—or almost unanimous—support for the motion.

Some very clear messages have come from this debate. Fundamentally, this is about the retrospective effect of the loan charge: people—our constituents—have acted in good faith and now face enormous bills, which, in many cases, can be devastating to them and their families. For me and others in the House, it is a clear breach of the rule of law and natural justice. Another message is that we are talking about ordinary people, not the mega-wealthy. We have to do more to pursue those who were the promoters of these schemes. Colleagues have very eloquently outlined their constituents' concerns and concerns about how their constituents are being treated and pursued by HMRC.

I thank the Minister for his considered response. Although we take a different view on the policy of the loan charge, I have always found him to be a decent, courteous and engaging individual, who has always been willing to listen to my constituents' concerns and act on them.

[*Ross Thomson*]

I am disappointed that there will not be a delay or an independent review of the loan charge. As the charge has come into effect, I hope that the Government will do all that they can to support individuals who find themselves in these circumstances and to show clemency and support to those who potentially face bankruptcy. I welcome the Minister's announcement that additional support will be put in to help those individuals, but we have to bear in mind that the only reason why they have to receive any additional support is that they are being put in this position in the first place.

Those of us who have been campaigning against the loan charge are not going to go away any time soon. We will keep engaging and campaigning on this issue. As Parliament has shown over the last few weeks, we can find many innovative and creative ways to make a change in this place. I thank everyone for taking the time to participate in this debate to raise the concerns of their constituents, and I hope that we will support the motion in front of us this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House expresses its serious concern at the 2019 Loan Charge which applies from 5 April 2019; expresses deep concern and regret about the effect of the mental and emotional impact on people facing the Loan Charge; is further concerned about suicides of people facing the Loan Charge and the identified suicide risk, which was reported to HMRC; believes that the Loan Charge is fundamentally unfair and undermines the principle of the rule of law by overriding statutory taxpayer protections; expresses disappointment at the lack of notice served by HMRC and the delays in communication with those now facing the Loan Charge, which has further increased anxiety of individuals and families; is concerned about the nature and accuracy of the information circulated by HMRC with regard to the Loan Charge; further regrets the inadequate impact assessment originally conducted; understands that many individuals have received miscalculated settlement information; calls for an immediate suspension of the Loan Charge for a period of six months and for all related settlements to be put on hold; and further calls for an independent inquiry into the Loan Charge to be conducted by a party that is not connected with either the Government or HMRC.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have in my hand the statutory instrument containing the regulations regarding the outcome of what I term the abject surrender that took place last night in Brussels. It was made at 3.15 pm today, and it was laid before Parliament at 4.15 pm—just three quarters of an hour ago. I raised some points earlier with the Speaker himself, which are on the record, and I just want to add to that by referring to the fact that we have a two-page explanatory memorandum for what is only about a six-line statutory instrument—for very good reason—and it includes, for example, reference to the commencement of section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. I just draw that to the attention of the House, because it is really important. It is essential that the public should know that this has been done. There are serious question marks over the legality of this, and there is likely to be a challenge in the courts, leading to the Supreme Court, on this issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The House knows how assiduous he has been in recent weeks—well, in recent decades—in making sure that the legality, the constitutional position, the propriety, the timing and so on of any matters that pass through this House are properly dealt with. I appreciate the points that he is making in relation to this statutory instrument, which has been laid this afternoon, but he knows, as the House knows, that it is not a matter on which I can give him an answer from the Chair. However, he has, in his usual eloquent way, drawn the matter to the attention of the House, of the Government and of the world in general. I thank him.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 10(2)(b), the sittings in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 23 April shall begin at 11.30am, shall be suspended from 1.30pm to 4.30pm and may then continue for up to a further three hours.—
(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Police Complaints and Accountability

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

5.3 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

My constituent Nicholas Churton was murdered in his own home, in the heart of Wrexham, on 23 March 2017 by Jordan Davidson. Davidson is responsible for this horrific crime and for other attacks, for which he is now serving a 30-year prison sentence. However, the events leading to these crimes revealed grave errors by the police and by the probation services in Wrexham and north Wales.

I have secured knowledge of the detail of those errors only with the assistance of Jez Hemming of the *Daily Post* newspaper in north Wales. For the bulk of this case, I have secured no co-operation whatever from North Wales police. Indeed, I now believe that I, along with the public, was misled deliberately about the facts of the case to conceal those errors, and that there has been a systematic cover-up involving North Wales police, the probation service, the community rehabilitation company, the Independent Police Complaints Commission and the Independent Office for Police Conduct.

The facts are that Davidson was released from prison in December 2016. He was under the supervision of the community rehabilitation company. A number of errors were made in his supervision, as was conceded by the probation service in an internal inquiry report on which I have been briefed, although I have not seen it. However, this evening I want to focus on the police.

On 19 March, while on licence, Davidson was arrested by North Wales police and taken into custody for possession of a knife. It appears that he was charged, but in any event he was released by the police and given bail, despite being on licence. The CRC was not notified by the police of his arrest until 24 March, the day after he had murdered Nicholas Churton.

After murdering Mr Churton, Davidson threatened others in central Wrexham. One of my constituents gave me this account:

“I came across Jordan Davidson and he was trying to commit robbery on an elderly gentleman, he was threatening him; this elder man was begging me to tell Jordan not to kill him. As Jordan was distracted by me the man left swiftly. He then turned on me he pulled a machete out, (the one used in the murder) demanded I told him where I lived and where my family were, of which I did not do. He told me at this time he had already killed two people, which I unfortunately found out later had some truth as he did murder one man. I managed to get away and phone the police as soon as I could.”

After Davidson’s arrest, which involved commendable bravery on the part of individual North Wales police officers, the Independent Police Complaints Commission, as it then was—now the Independent Office for Police Conduct—commenced an inquiry into contact between Mr Churton and North Wales police before Mr Churton’s death. That inquiry, which I will call IOPC 1, has now concluded. Contrary to IPCC policy, I, as the local MP, was not informed about the inquiry or its terms of reference.

In December 2017, following Davidson’s trial, I saw a summary of the prosecution case used at the trial. That was the first communication that I received about the

case, and I was shocked by its contents. I immediately wanted to know why Davidson had been released from police custody on 19 March, four days before killing Mr Churton. I emailed the then chief constable, Mark Polin, and asked him why that had happened. He replied that because the matter was subject to an IPCC inquiry, he could not respond to my question. I now know that that was untrue. In fact, the IPCC inquiry related only to communications between Mr Churton and the police prior to Mr Churton’s murder. There was no inquiry into the circumstances of Davidson’s release from custody on 19 March. In April 2018, following my own questions and inquiries, the IOPC commenced an inquiry into his release which has still not concluded.

Let me ask the Minister a number of questions. First, why did North Wales police and the IPCC fail to tell me of a police conduct inquiry involving a murder and additional serious assaults in the middle of my constituency? Secondly, who decided to exclude the police decision to release Davidson on bail after his arrest for possession of an offensive weapon from the terms of reference of the IPCC inquiry, and why was that done? Thirdly, why did the then chief constable of North Wales, Mark Polin, tell me that there was an inquiry into Davidson’s release when there was not?

Fourthly, was the North Wales police and crime commissioner notified of the inquiry by the IPCC in 2017, and of its terms of reference? Is there an obligation to notify PCCs of such inquiries? If a notification was made in this case, when was it made? Fifthly, was the family of Nicholas Churton notified of the inquiry, and the fact of the release of Davidson four days before his murder? Sixthly, why did the probation service and the CRC fail to highlight the fact that the release of Davidson was not included in the IPCC inquiry? Should they have done so?

To my mind, we have a cover-up in this case. I was not told, as I should have been, of the inquiry into the death of my constituent. The release of Davidson on bail by the police was, I believe, concealed from Mr Churton’s family, from me, and from the public who were endangered by him. I was misled by the then chief constable of North Wales police, who told me that the release was the subject of an inquiry when it was not. At the suggestion of the IOPC in a letter that I received yesterday, I have now made a formal complaint to North Wales police and crime commissioner about this, although I am very disappointed that it required action by me for them even to investigate the matter.

My concern is that the present system permitted all this to happen and allowed the police and the IPCC to cover up serious misconduct which, in this case, led to a murder in the heart of my constituency a few days later. This misconduct was not notified, to my knowledge, to anyone outside North Wales police, including the IOPC and the family of the deceased, until I raised it myself. I had to tell the family of the deceased of the release of Jordan Davidson.

It is now over two years since Nicholas Churton was brutally murdered. We need an independent investigation into how this happened. I have no confidence in the various bodies and organisations that I have referred to because none of them and none of the systems worked to reveal the errors in this case, which had catastrophic consequences. What we need above all is some transparency

[Ian C. Lucas]

and honesty from the organisations involved. The family of Nicholas Churton, with whom I have been working, deserve that honesty.

I have a great deal of respect for the Minister, and I hope that he will assist me in sorting out a system that can deliver transparency and openness to enable us to have confidence in the organisations that operate on our behalf in our communities.

5.2 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) on securing this debate, which I think is his second on this specific subject in Parliament, which reflects his persistence and passion for getting to the truth of some clear evidence of failure of the system in this tragic murder. If he will allow me, I would also like to place on record my personal condolences and sympathy to the family of Nicholas Churton. The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. The death is a tragedy and, I am sure, extremely difficult for the family to deal with. We do not want to compound it by creating a sense of the system not learning from or being honest about the past. I know the hon. Gentleman to be a man of common sense and experience in this place. When I hear him articulate his feeling that he has been personally misled and talk about a systematic cover-up, I know that he will not be using that language lightly. I take that seriously and congratulate him on his persistence and his campaign on this. Clearly, the *Daily Post* and Jez Hemming have been an active partner in that.

Jordan Davidson is now rightly serving a life sentence for his wicked and senseless murder of Mr Churton. I join the hon. Member for Wrexham in recognising the bravery of the two North Wales police officers, PCs Rhys Rushby and David Hall, who were attacked with a hammer when they arrested Davidson and have subsequently attended the National Police Bravery Awards 2019. The key thing surely is that the family and the hon. Gentleman feel comfortable that an honest process is under way to learn from the mistakes that clearly were made. In that context, let me address the remainder of my remarks to the issues that he raised about the police and the IOPC, which were the main focus of his remarks.

For the information of the House, I place on record that the probation service had a number of questions to answer, given that Jordan Davidson was subject to statutory probation supervision at the time. The Wales Community Rehabilitation Company had to complete a serious further offence review and identified a number of deficiencies in the management of Jordan Davidson. Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service subsequently oversaw the Wales CRC's implementation of the improvement actions from the SFO review. My understanding—I stand to be corrected—is that all actions on that SFO action plan for Jordan Davidson had been completed at the end of November 2018, and the effectiveness of the actions continues to be monitored through contract management assurance activity and governance.

I am aware that the hon. Gentleman met the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), in December last year to discuss his concerns about the case. He will

be aware that the Minister remains of the view that there was no evidence of systematic failings that would warrant an inquiry. I hope he is more satisfied than he is with the police's role in this case that the probation service has addressed the issues and failings and that the action plan has been implemented.

Ian C. Lucas: On that point, for clarification's sake, it is correct that I met the Minister from the Ministry of Justice. We decided to await the outcome of the outstanding IOPC 2 report, because there are issues relating to the communication between the police and the probation service that will become clear only when that report concludes.

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for placing that important clarification on the record. As he made clear, this tragic case is subject to investigations—plural—by the Independent Office for Police Conduct. The IOPC's first investigation was concerned with North Wales police's contact with Mr Churton, and that concluded in October last year. It identified cases to answer for misconduct for two officers and urged the force to review its procedures in recognising vulnerability, grading and resourcing and making use of intelligence. I understand that the force has already undertaken work in some of those areas since referring Mr Churton's death to the IOPC. I had that confirmed personally to me by the assistant chief constable.

As the hon. Gentleman said, a second IOPC investigation into the force's involvement in the management of Jordan Davidson remains ongoing. He made the point that the investigation has already run for a year. I understand, having asked the question, that the IOPC expects to complete it by this summer. I hope that reassures him. He will understand that it would be inappropriate for me to comment further while that investigation is ongoing. He and I will have to wait until the respective investigation reports have been published and potential proceedings have concluded.

I heard clearly the hon. Gentleman's frustration about his engagement with the police and the system and the degree to which he feels misled—a powerful word in this context. I understand that he has been in correspondence with and met senior members of North Wales police to discuss its organisational learning, its response to date and intended actions. If he feels that contact has not been substantive or that there are issues that continue to need to be addressed, he and I should discuss that. I can certainly help him to make that point directly to North Wales police's leadership.

Ian C. Lucas: Just to clarify the position, I met the police around the time of the conclusion of the first IOPC inquiry; I think that was within the last six months. I had no communication at all from the police before then. It is fair to say that North Wales police now has a new chief constable and that this case relates to the previous regime, so to speak.

Mr Hurd: I note both points, and I note from reading the reports of previous debates and the briefing for this one that the previous chief constable held the view that he was heavily restricted in what he could say and the information he could pass on. However, I understand that, under new leadership, the engagement with the

hon. Gentleman is more forthcoming, and I welcome that. I note also his comments about the police and crime commissioner.

We believe that much work has been done in the time since Mr Churton's tragic murder in order for North Wales police to embed and improve understanding in relation to their procedures for the effective management of risk. That work has been carried out in advance of the publication of the IOPC reports, in order to ensure that it is positioned as well as possible to respond to any emerging recommendations.

Examples of that work include a full review of the force's control room policies in relation to the grading of incidents and resource deployment, which has resulted in a single update force control centre policy. Regular meetings have been established between the managed response unit supervisors and the control room supervisors to share learning. Furthermore, in January 2018, the force introduced a structured monthly audit process on individual call performance, which now captures important information on the nature of the call to the force and the initial actions of the call handler. Those supervisors will also be subject to audits to ensure that their intervention and supervision of vulnerable incidents is monitored.

I understand that the force has also invited the hon. Gentleman to visit its joint control room to gain a better understanding of how it acts as the vital first point of contact between the public of north Wales and operational police officers. That will provide an opportunity to experience the processes in action, to assist with the understanding of procedures for the effective assessment and management of risk and the deployment of officers. I hope the visit will provide the hon. Gentleman with an awareness of how the force manages incidents of this type and that he will witness the work the force has already implemented as a result.

I get a sense from that that the North Wales police have been active in responding to evidence of failings in their processes, and that the force is more proactive and constructive in its engagement with the hon. Gentleman and, I understand, the family as well. I hope he will welcome that.

At the heart of this is the issue of how police complaints are managed and the timeliness of investigations, which has been a long-standing problem. The hon. Gentleman reflected that frustration in his remarks and I am sure it is felt deeply by the family as well.

We have encouraged substantial reform in the way in which the IOPC manages complaints and streamlines processes. Complaints made against the police must be responded to in a way that maintains trust, builds public confidence and allows lessons to be learned. I am the first to acknowledge that the current system can sometimes be confusing, opaque and frustrating for the public and for Members of Parliament representing them.

I am delighted to say that the IOPC is now completing more investigations more quickly than ever before. As evidence of that, in the first full financial year since its inception in January 2018, approximately 80% of the IOPC's investigations were completed within 12 months, which is a 20% improvement on the previous year. That is the highest performance in the history of the organisation.

The average time taken to complete investigations to final report is 10 months. Of the 538 active cases that the IOPC inherited from the IPCC, more than three

quarters have now been closed, and in 2018 it closed more investigations than were opened. Importantly, the improvements in timeliness have not caused the quality of investigations to fall. Through the ministerial board on deaths in custody, the IOPC is also leading on work with other stakeholders to drive improvements in how they work in IOPC cases.

What I take from this debate is that the hon. Gentleman continues to feel not only deep misgivings about how the system—both the probation service and the police—handled the tragic murder and the events leading up to and after it, but a deep frustration about how, since then, the system has, in his clear view, failed to engage appropriately with him in his job representing his constituency and the family. This debate will be watched closely in Wrexham and by the authorities there, and that message will not be lost on them.

The hon. Gentleman asked some direct questions to which I do not have the answers today, but I undertake to get back to him. The feedback we have had from North Wales police is that it is beginning to action fundamental changes to its processes in response to evidence of failings.

The hon. Gentleman has heard from me today that the IOPC intends to conclude the second investigation by the summer and to publish both the first and the second investigation reports together. He and I will have to wait to see the outcomes. He has also met the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border, to get a clearer sense of the changes that the probation system has made in response to its failings.

Ian C. Lucas: My key concern is that Davidson's release from custody was not made subject to IPCC investigation by North Wales police or by the IPCC, and no one outside the force knew of that fact. It was only when I highlighted it that the investigation commenced. My concern is that the systems are still not in place to make sure it cannot happen again.

Mr Hurd: I understand that message very clearly, and it will be heard by the IOPC. I undertake to make sure that the IOPC has absorbed the message. My understanding is that the first investigation looked at the police's dealings and contact with Nicholas Churton and the second is looking specifically at their contact and dealings with Jordan Davidson, but the hon. Gentleman's point is well made. Through the mechanism of this debate and the follow-up, I undertake to make sure that the message is clearly understood by the IOPC as it finalises its work for publication, hopefully this summer.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman again on his persistence in pushing the system hard to be more transparent in its processes and more rigorous in learning from mistakes. I completely understand why that should matter both to him and to the family. I have confidence in the IOPC in terms of the rigour and increased pace of its work. If it says it will be done by the summer, I am sure it will be.

I have given some undertakings to the hon. Gentleman on trying to get some detailed answers to his detailed questions, if I can, within the scope of what is allowed. I am sure North Wales police has heard loud and clear his messages concerning his frustration about the force's historical dealings with him.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before the House adjourns, I thank everybody who works so hard and such long hours to support and look after us here in the Palace of Westminster, and who have spent extra time that they were not expecting to spend in the run-up to Easter. I wish all of them, and all hon. Members, a happy and peaceful Easter holiday.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Tuesday 23 April 2019

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Victims Law

1. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): When the Government plan to undertake a consultation on proposals for a victims law. [910418]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Mr Speaker, I will endeavour to croak my way through my response.

We published the first ever pan-Government victims strategy in September 2018 containing 88 commitments, of which we have already implemented 24, to better support victims of crime. Among those is a commitment to consult this year on the revised victims code and details of victim-focused legislation, reaffirming our manifesto commitment to such a law.

Henry Smith: I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending condolences and expressing shock at the terrorist attack in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday. Sadly, it highlights the issue of the effect on victims of terror incidents, whether in this country or abroad. When will the Government come forward with a law to ensure that victims are properly supported, because all too many reports from victims in previous incidents suggest that that has not been the case?

Edward Argar: I join my hon. Friend in his expression of condolence and sympathy to all those who were affected by the horrific events in Sri Lanka over the weekend. It is vital that we get any new legislation right—hence our commitment to consult. We will first revise and strengthen the victims code and then identify any legislative gaps arising from that. We will consult on a victims law this year and bring forward legislation subsequently when parliamentary time allows.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Minister and the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) for what they said. Many Members will have noted what is on the *Annunciator*, but for those who have not I simply give notice of the intention for us to hold one minute's silence in respectful memory of those who tragically and horrifically lost their lives in Sri Lanka, and that will take place after the urgent questions and immediately before the first of the ministerial statements.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that the tragic victims are those people who cannot speak because they have been killed by an accident or a violent crime? Will he meet me to discuss the case of a bereaved family whose little girl was killed 15 months ago as a driver crashed into a bus queue? The driver not only killed the little girl, an only child, but seriously injured another woman. They have not been prosecuted. Can we have a chat about that?

Edward Argar: I would not want to comment on specific cases on the Floor of the House, and although decisions on prosecution are not a matter for Ministers, I would, as always, be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If prolific repeat offenders spent longer in jail there would be fewer victims of crime in all of our communities. Does the Minister agree?

Edward Argar: I believe that the key to seeing fewer victims of crime is effective rehabilitation of offenders and breaking the cycle of offending. That is exactly what I and the Secretary of State are focused on.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent Kristian Thompson would have been 27 years old today had his life not been taken when he was 19 years old after he was the victim of a one-punch attack. His mam, Maxine, set up the charity One Punch UK. This week is One Punch Awareness Week when many people who have lost loved ones are pleading with the Government to follow Australia and Canada and create a one-punch law imposing a minimum sentence for perpetrators. Why are the Government continuing to resist doing so?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and I send my sympathies to Kristian's family and friends on the terrible events that she has just described. I am very happy to look at what she is proposing, and if she would like to write to me, I will respond as fully as I can.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): A vital feature of justice for victims is financial redress, so why have this Government presided over a near 60% fall in the number of victims of violent crime receiving payments from the criminal injuries compensation scheme?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for her question. Our ongoing review of the criminal injuries compensation scheme has one simple aim: to make sure that it better supports victims and reflects their needs in the 21st century. Indeed, last year we awarded compensation of more than £154 million, and recently, we have announced that we are abolishing the "same-roof" rule so that many more victims can make claims. In respect of the specific issue to which she refers, which I believe was covered in *The Guardian* newspaper recently, I would sound a slight note of caution about the figures for 2010-11 being a benchmark as I understand there is a possibility that they were inflated that year due to a £30 million pay-out specifically for compensation for asbestos-related conditions. None the less, I welcome her engagement with the review that we will be undertaking this summer.

Imprisonment for Public Protection

2. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce the number of prisoners serving sentences of imprisonment for public protection. [910419]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government are committed to providing IPP prisoners with opportunities to progress to the point at which they are safe to release. Our primary responsibility is public protection. Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and the Parole Board are delivering a joint action plan to improve IPP prisoners' sentence progression. In 2017-18, three quarters of those considered by the Parole Board were either recommended for release or a move to open conditions. This shows that our approach is working.

Jeff Smith: My constituent Wayne Bell is currently in the 12th year of a sentence for which the original tariff was four years. Owing to his significant mental health issues, he is unable to engage with the parole process and the review process, and his mental health problems are exacerbated by the hopelessness of his situation. Does the Secretary of State realise that prisoners with mental health issues can get trapped in a vicious cycle where it becomes almost impossible to achieve parole, and will he look at interventions that could be considered to enable Wayne's cases and others like it to be resolved?

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this point. I am happy to write to him on the individual case, which has a number of complexities, as I am sure he is aware. I have mentioned the joint action plan to improve IPP prisoners' sentence progression. These measures include case reviews led by psychologists for those prisoners not making the expected progress, an increased number of places on specialist progression regimes, and greatly improved access to rehabilitative programmes. I continue to be ambitious to ensure that we do everything we can in this area, remembering that public protection must remain our priority.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for what he has said about his ambitions for IPP prisoners. Does the joint action plan have an end date—that is, is there a date beyond which we should not detain people under these sorts of sentences?

Mr Gauke: In the end, it comes down to the decisions made by the Parole Board, which has to make its decisions based on public protection. In some cases—regrettable though it may be—if someone is not safe to be released, the Parole Board must make that decision. We need to ensure that we do everything we can to progress these cases as best we can. As I have said, we have made progress in recent years.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The latest figures show that there are still nearly 2,500 prisoners serving IPP sentences. These sentences often have punitive recall conditions, which means that people might be returned to prison for fairly minor breaches of their licence conditions, resulting in many prisoners serving well beyond their original tariffs. It was previously a target of the Parole Board to reduce IPP prisoner numbers to 1,500 by 2020, so what steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that this happens?

Mr Gauke: Obviously I want to reduce the numbers, and one of the reasons that we have provided additional support to the Parole Board is to enable it to do so. In the end, it comes down to individual decisions in respect of particular individuals, and some cases present a number of challenging factors. Decisions have to strike the right balance between progressing people as we should and ensuring that we protect the public.

Access to Criminal Justice

3. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase access to the criminal justice system. [910420]

7. **Teresa Pearce** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase access to the criminal justice system. [910424]

20. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase access to the criminal justice system. [910446]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): It is vital that our criminal justice system remains fair and accessible, and we are taking a number of steps to ensure justice within it. Legal aid is a very important part of that process, and last year we spent almost £900 million on criminal legal aid alone. However, our court system also needs to be modern and up to date, so we are spending £1 billion on technology to bring our court system up to date for the 21st century.

Mr Virendra Sharma: I thank the Minister for her response. The Law Society has highlighted the fact that low criminal legal aid fees are having an adverse impact on the number of new, younger lawyers. Criminal legal aid fees for solicitors have not been increased since the 1990s. Will the Government commit to raising fees for solicitors, at least in line with inflation?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, because those who work within the criminal justice system play a vital part in upholding justice. That is why, over the course of last year, we have consulted the professions and put a further £23 million into the advocates' graduated fee scheme. It is also why we have recently announced that we will be doing a holistic review of criminal legal aid with regard to the professions, looking overall at a whole range of issues across the Bar and across the duty solicitor schemes. That review has already started.

Teresa Pearce: I thank the Minister for that reply, but there is a crisis in legal aid and in legal representation. The Law Society data says that within five to 10 years there will be insufficient criminal duty solicitors in many regions. She has mentioned the review and mentioned more money, but what specific steps will she take to make sure that people have their right to be represented while being interviewed by the police?

Lucy Frazer: Doing a review and putting in £23 million are specific steps to ensure that we get better justice. I am very grateful to the Law Society, which the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall

(Mr Sharma) mentioned, because it is actively engaged in our review, as are the Bar Council and the Criminal Bar Association.

Janet Daby: It is really good to hear that the Law Society is having such an impact on the Government. However, the Law Society has also published research that shows that the criminal legal aid means test is preventing families living in poverty from accessing justice. Although the Government will eventually review this, the review will not conclude until 2020, and it will be even further down the line when any changes come into place. Will the Minister therefore commit to taking action now to ensure that vulnerable people are still able to access justice?

Lucy Frazer: I am very pleased that the hon. Lady has highlighted that we have already committed to doing a review of the threshold for legal aid across the board, not just in relation to criminal law but civil law as well. It is very important that we get that review right. Legal aid has not been uprated for a number of years. We have committed to doing that, but not only that—we have already started the review.

Violence in Prisons

4. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to tackle violence in prisons. [910421]

10. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of violence in prisons. [910427]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing our deep horror at the recent attack against a prison officer in Nottingham prison. It is completely horrifying to see this happen. It must not happen again. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to our prison officers for the work they do in very difficult circumstances keeping us safe. There are three main things we can do to stop this kind of thing happening again. We need to improve perimeter security, which means really searching people for weapons and drugs at the gate; we need to make sure that the conditions in the prison are decent and work; and, above all, we need to provide the training and support for prison officers to have the right kind of relationships with prisoners whereby things like this do not occur again.

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend the Minister vowed that if prison violence did not decrease, he would resign. I, for one, think that we have seen too many members of the Government resign. Could he give us an update on his own ambitions to stay in post?

Rory Stewart: As some people in the House will be aware, I promised to reduce violence in 10 key challenge prisons over a 12-month period. At the moment, the figures are looking reasonably positive. In other words, it looks as though, in the majority of these prisons, violence is coming down so hon. Members may be in the unfortunate position of still having me at this Dispatch Box in a few months' time.

Alex Norris: As the Minister mentioned, on Sunday 14 April a prison officer at my local prison in Nottingham had his throat slashed with a razor by a prisoner in what his union calls a cowardly, unprovoked act. According to doctors, this young public servant—a brave man in his early 20s—came within millimetres of losing his life. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to this prison officer and to his thousands of colleagues facing this sort of violence every day, and does he agree with the union—the Prison Officers Association—that this ought to be treated as an attempted murder?

Rory Stewart: I absolutely agree that these are extraordinary public servants. This is a horrifying and completely unacceptable act. We need to punish the person who did it, and we need to punish them properly. At the moment, the charge that is being brought forward carries the maximum life sentence, as it should, but there is more that we can do. That includes body-worn cameras, the rolling out of PAVA spray and ensuring we have enough officers on the landings, which is why I am pleased that we now have the highest number of prison officers at any date since 2012.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Would there not be less violence in our prisons if there was a relentless focus from the first day in prison on getting prisoners work on release? We could do that by combining training in prison with employer and college support on release.

Rory Stewart: This is not an either/or. We have to be confident and practical about doing two things at the same time. Controlling prisons—these include some quite dangerous individuals—involves serious measures on searching people for drugs and weapons, but it also involves treating people like humans and turning their lives around, because that is the way we protect the public from the misery of crime through reoffending when these individuals are released from prison.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): In the light of the recent disturbances among 16 and 17-year-olds at Feltham young offenders institution, is the Minister aware of the previous episodes of violence at the prison, which were attributed to the lack of education and training facilities, 23-hour confinement in cells and the mixing of remand and convicted prisoners? Why do lessons appear not to have been learned?

Rory Stewart: A lot of lessons have been learned since that initial event, but the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; there was a very disturbing event two weeks ago. The basic challenge, as he will be aware, is getting the balance right between ensuring that people are motivated and focused on the regime and that there are high expectations around prisoners and prison officers. To some extent, it is like running a very difficult school, particularly when we are dealing with 16 to 18-year-olds. It is a mixture of being strict on the one hand and loving on the other that is the key to a good prison.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Does the Minister agree with his party's former long-serving Secretary of State, Sir Malcolm Rifkind—a self-confessed true believer in privatisation—who wrote recently in the *Financial Times*:

“The physical deprivation of a citizen's liberty should not be the responsibility of a private company or of its employees”?

Does the Minister accept that the renationalisation of HMP Birmingham heralds the end of his Government's failed prison privatisation agenda?

Rory Stewart: I respectfully disagree with Sir Malcolm on this issue. It was absolutely right to take Birmingham back in hand, because that prison was not performing properly. On the other hand, the same company is running some very good prisons in Oakwood, Altcourse and Parc. It is doing good things on family work and on technology. Private sector prisons are often among the safer local prisons in terms of assaults per 1,000. We are not ideological on this. The private sector can certainly play a role.

Welfare Benefits: Legal Advice

5. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of people able to access early legal advice for welfare benefits cases. [910422]

22. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of people able to access early legal advice for welfare benefits cases. [910448]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): In the most recent Legal Aid Agency civil tender, the number of offices providing legal aid services on welfare benefits increased by 188%. In February, we set out our legal support action plan, which focused on the importance of early legal support. We will be establishing a number of pilots in a range of areas of law to see how best we can support those in need. It is critical that welfare decisions are made right the first time, and we are working with the Department for Work and Pensions to help ensure that.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for that answer, but she will know that the number of people receiving legal aid to challenge benefit decisions fell from more than 91,000 in 2012-13 to fewer than 500 five years later, which was clearly the Government's plan. The Department's own figures show that while 28% of unrepresented claimants are successful on appeal, that figure jumps to 90% for those who have legal representation, so literally tens of thousands of people have lost out on moneys to which they were entitled. Does she agree that the Government should consider restoring legal aid for social security appeals, so that claimants can get the support they need to win the money they deserve?

Lucy Frazer: Legal aid is available in welfare cases on points of law to the upper tribunal and the higher courts. A wide variety of considerable support is also available from some fantastic third sector organisations. I visited a number of them recently, and they are doing an excellent job. As I mentioned, we are also looking in our legal aid action plan at how we can provide people with support early on in a variety of areas, which may include this area.

Stephen Morgan: Recent BBC research found that 1 million people live in areas with no legal aid provision for housing, with a further 15 million in areas with just one provider. Does the Minister not agree that only rogue landlords benefit from this situation?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman mentions housing. It is right that, across the country, some areas are quite sparsely populated, but people can always get advice on the telephone gateway. There are 134 housing and debt procurement areas, and as of 31 March 2019, there is at least one provider offering housing and debt services in all but five procurement areas. The Legal Aid Agency recently concluded a procurement process, and services in three of those areas will commence on 1 May. The agency is considering how to procure provision in the remaining two.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Government cuts to legal aid have left tens of thousands of welfare benefit claimants without the ability to appeal flawed DWP decisions. We continue to see harrowing stories of those who have suffered after such poor decisions. Those cuts left tens of thousands of tenants unable to take on lousy landlords, and left migrants unable to fight back against the Conservative party's hostile environment. Can the Minister explain why these vulnerable people are far too easily cast aside, while the private companies failing in our prison, probation and courts systems are too readily bailed out? Does this not sum up in whose interests the Conservative party governs?

Lucy Frazer: This party and this Government would like to support all people who need support, but we need to provide it in a way that is efficient, provides a good service and uses taxpayers' money well. That is why we set out in our legal aid support strategy a variety of pilots that we will hold to help people in a variety of areas of law—housing, immigration—and all these can be bid for. We are putting forward £5 million for people to develop and put in place technology provision, face-to-face support and other support for legal aid.

Richard Burgon: It is just not good enough because all too often the Government spin against legal aid, with talk of fat cat lawyers and unmeritorious claims, but the latest figures show that the number of not-for-profit providers, such as law centres, has fallen by nearly two thirds under this Government. Will the Minister follow Labour's lead and commit to funding a new generation of social welfare lawyers that can empower communities to battle against injustice and a new generation of law centres that can empower people to fight back against cruel Government policies?

Lucy Frazer: While the professions and those who provide support are incredibly important—that is why, as I mentioned earlier, we have put £23 million more into criminal legal aid professionals—we would like to focus on helping those who need that support. That is why we are focusing on our £5 million innovation fund to find out what sort of support people need and how best to provide that support. We recommend and hope to support bids from legal advice centres as well as from professionals.

Youth Justice System

6. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps he is taking to reform the youth justice system. [910423]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Significant reform has been undertaken since 2010, and we remain committed to driving further

improvements. While fewer young people are committing crimes for the first time, with an 86% reduction in the number of young people entering the youth justice system for the first time, we still have more to do to break the cycle of reoffending. Working with youth offending teams in partnership is central to prevention, but for those who end up in custody, we believe our reforms to move to a secure school model will play a key role in reducing further offending.

Nigel Huddleston: The recent increase in knife crime has highlighted the very young age at which some of our most vulnerable young people get involved in crime. What steps is the Department taking to divert young people away from offending and reoffending?

Edward Argar: We work very closely with youth offending teams and youth offending services run by local authorities to help with that prevention. I pay tribute particularly to the team in Lewisham, whom I was lucky enough to visit the other day. We also work closely with the Department for Education on exclusions and the role they can play in causing offending behaviour.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Feltham young offenders institution has had a difficult recent history and problems with sustainability of management. Following the recent attack on prison officers, I am grateful to the Minister for how quickly the management, the Prison Officers Association and the Department responded.

It is increasingly clear that the growing violence to which young inmates are subject, and which they experience prior to prison, is presenting new challenges. Will the Minister join me in welcoming new projects that use sport—such as Tough Cricket in Feltham, which works with faith communities—to support young offenders in more positive activity and help to develop an alternative set of values?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her work following the incidents of violence that she has mentioned. Once again, I thank the Prison Officers Association for its constructive engagement, and our thoughts are with the welfare of the injured staff. She is absolutely right to highlight the importance of sport as one of the positive ways we can divert young people away from violence and offending behaviour.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Too many young people who get involved in crime have been failed by the education system or have special educational needs, which often go undiagnosed or are not coped with well by schools. What more can be done to ensure that young people do not fall foul of the system and end up with very few qualifications and very little hope for the future?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Central to tackling the problem is partnership working, not only with youth offending teams but with colleagues in the educational sphere. We are fully engaged with Edward Timpson's review of exclusions, and we are working very closely with the Department for Education on matters such as speech and language therapy, learning disabilities and other factors that can play a part.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The age and maturity of children is so important. The age of criminal responsibility here is 10 years, which is low; it is 14 years in Germany and 15 years in Italy. There was a 60% increase in the number of young offenders between 1996 and 2004. What has been done to reduce the number of young offenders?

Edward Argar: We have worked extremely hard across the Government, and with local authorities and other state and charity agencies, to drive down the level of offending. We have seen an 86% reduction in the number of young people coming into the criminal justice system for the first time, but there is more to do to break the cycle of reoffending for those who are already in the system, and that is what we are focused on.

Housing Cases: Legal Advice

8. **Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of trends in the number of people able to access early legal advice for housing cases. [910425]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): Legal aid is available when someone is at risk of losing their home or seeking to address safety concerns that pose a serious risk of harm to the person or their family. In 2017-18, the Legal Aid Agency spent £28 million on housing matters, including £9 million on legal help for housing. We recognise that early support may well be helpful, and I have mentioned already a number of pilots and an innovation fund. We will also be piloting face-to-face advice in an area of social welfare law, which may possibly be in housing.

Bambos Charalambous: Labour has committed to restoring legal aid funding for early legal advice for housing, welfare benefits appeals and family law cases, helping hundreds of thousands of people. Why have the Government refused to do the same, despite evidence that to do so would actually save them money?

Lucy Frazer: There is already funding available, as I have mentioned. In 2017-18, we also spent £3.6 million on the housing possession court duty scheme—in other words, on-the-day advice. The Government want to ensure that people are helped early on, but also that we provide advice in the best way possible. That is why instead of just ploughing taxpayers' money back into traditional legal aid, we want to evaluate many different forms of provision of early legal support and see which is the best, and then we will take a decision on what support we want to give.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister may well say that, but thousands of families up and down the country rely on citizens advice bureaux and law centres for help with a wide variety of problems. Even refugees rely on those centres. What is she going to do about properly funding those organisations? They cannot wait around for some Government review that might take place in the future. Will she deal with the matter urgently?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman mentioned immigration, and people can already get legal aid for asylum cases. We are committed to ensuring that people know when legal aid is available to them. We are going

to advertise when it is possible and undertake a programme to ensure that people know when legal aid can be claimed. In other areas where it is currently out of scope, we want to ensure that we provide it in the best way possible. In relation to housing advice, I should also mention that people can always get advice on the telephone gateway.

Leaving the EU: Legal System

9. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What steps the Government plan to take to ensure that the UK legal system operates effectively after the UK leaves the EU. [910426]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The UK and the EU have agreed the terms of an implementation period. If Parliament is able to support a deal, common rules will remain in place during that period. That will provide certainty to businesses and citizens. The UK and EU have also committed to explore a new agreement on family judicial co-operation and other related matters; ambitious arrangements for services and investment, including legal services; and a future security partnership. My Department continues to work to ensure we are in the best position to negotiate our priorities.

Gavin Newlands: The former Brexit Minister, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) said at the Dispatch Box that a no-deal Brexit “would not result in a reduction in mutual capability”—[*Official Report*, 20 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 1077]—on security and law enforcement co-operation.

However, the Solicitor General, when giving evidence to the Justice Committee, said:

“A no deal is deeply suboptimal when it comes to criminal justice”

and that

“we would lose the European arrest warrant”,

which

“raises all sorts of questions of delay and, frankly, potential denial of justice”.

Will the Justice Secretary tell me which Minister’s version of the post-Brexit future is accurate?

Mr Gauke: We are very clear that the best way forward is to reach a deal. That is what the Government are endeavouring to achieve and support from across the House would be quite helpful in delivering that.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Solicitor General’s evidence to the Justice Committee was indeed crystal clear. Does my right hon. Friend also agree that it is critical for civil justice co-operation that there should be a deal? None of the ambitious objectives for future collaboration would work if there is no deal. For example, mutual recognition and enforceability of judgments in civil and family law cases would fall away immediately in the event of no deal.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right to highlight these issues. We have made progress in our negotiations, particularly in the context of family law. It is to the advantage of citizens in the UK and the EU that a deal is reached, which will enable us to enforce judgments in

this area. Our ambitions are to go further and, in terms of the future framework, to make further progress on civil judicial co-operation.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): In thousands of instances, we are not able to deliver justice in this country unless we have a proper extradition agreement with other countries in the European Union. As I understand it, even if the withdrawal agreement were to go forward at some point, we will still have to operate as a third party outside the European arrest warrant. Relying on the 1957 treaties will not be enough, so what plans does the Secretary of State have to ensure we are able to maintain a proper extradition arrangement with other countries in the European Union?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that on leaving the European Union we will not have access to the European arrest warrant. We would wish to be able to do so, but there are difficulties. For example, Germany has a constitutional bar in this area. The Home Office continues to work with EU member states to try to find a way in which we can have as effective extradition and arrest warrant arrangements as possible.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Justice issues are, of course, largely devolved. EU initiatives such as Eurojust and the European arrest warrant are well utilised by Scottish prosecutors and are hugely valued by them. In the current Brexit talks between the UK Government and the Labour party, will the Secretary of State confirm what proposals regarding justice have been discussed and if the Scottish Government have been or will be consulted on these or any forthcoming proposals that may result from the talks between the Tories and the Labour party?

Mr Gauke: I am not going to comment specifically on those discussions. What I would say in the context of no-deal preparations is that, as I understand it, the Scottish Government have not allocated any of the money given to them for no-deal preparation on justice matters. Certainly, when it comes to the United Kingdom, we are doing everything we can to prepare for every eventuality.

Joanna Cherry: I can assure the Secretary of State that the Scottish Government’s no-deal planning is well advanced. The Justice Secretary’s Government recently opted into the Eurojust regulation. Eurojust plays a vital role in the fight against serious organised crime, particularly terrorism but also cyber-crime and child pornography. His Department said that opting in was necessary to ensure that the UK continues to work in line with our European partners in the lead-up to exit day and during the transition period. Will he tell us how many more justice opt-ins has he planned before Brexit takes place and will they feature in the Tory manifesto for the EU Parliament elections?

Mr Gauke: What I say to the hon. and learned Lady is that we want to work in a pragmatic way with the European Union, so that as we leave the EU, we continue to co-operate wherever we can to our mutual benefit. That does require us to reach a deal.

Access to Justice: Criminal Case Delays

11. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of delays in progressing criminal cases in the courts on access to justice. [910428]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): Unnecessary delays can always cause distress for all parties. Some cases are moving more quickly through the criminal courts, but due to the complexity of cases, impacts on the time that they take to reach courts are being realised. The Crown Prosecution Service and the police are driving change across the system through the national disclosure improvement plan, and we are working to reduce delays and improve the way cases are progressed through the system through better case management and transforming summary justice.

Kate Green: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer and I am aware of the work that is being done to improve disclosure processes, which both the Law Society and my local police tell me are still contributing to delayed and, in some cases, collapsed trials. What is her view of the Law Society's suggestion that different disclosure rules should apply in the magistrates courts and Crown courts, where the nature of the cases and the amount of disclosed but unused material differ greatly?

Lucy Frazer: Of course, the Attorney General has done a review in relation to disclosure more broadly. I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss any ideas that she would like to put forward on those matters.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Since 2016, payments to consultancies by Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service have shot up from £3 million to £20 million. The Government appear to think that expensive private consultants are the solution to all their problems, even in the face of spiralling costs. Does the Minister really believe that the way to increase access to justice is to hand over yet more public money to private consultants at a time when our courts are facing unprecedented cuts?

Lucy Frazer: We are in the process of a £1 billion court programme—one of the most ambitious across the world in relation to how we transform our justice system—and it is appropriate that we get the best and right advice to manage that process. Sometimes we find that it is cheaper to instruct experts than it is to develop that expertise internally, so we use consultants where appropriate.

Enforcement Agents: Regulation

12. **Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the regulation of enforcement agents. [910429]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): There is no excuse for aggressive tactics by bailiffs. I know that the hon. Lady has worked very hard to highlight the issues that have occurred in her constituency, and I was very grateful for her contribution

to a recent Westminster Hall debate. She will know that we have undertaken a call for evidence, which addresses the regulation of the industry. Recently, we were very pleased to see the report of the Justice Committee, and we will respond both to the call for evidence and the Justice Committee's report in the summer.

Emma Reynolds: I thank the Minister for that answer. It is unacceptable that many people, including the disabled constituent of mine she referred to, have suffered at the hands of aggressive bailiffs, who seem to think that they are above the law. Debt collectors and debt advice charities are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, but bailiffs are an anomaly in all this and do not have independent regulation. I hear what she says about the timetable, but when the Government do respond to the call for evidence and the Justice Committee report, will that include plans for an independent regulator of bailiffs?

Lucy Frazer: As the hon. Lady will know, regulation is one of the questions that we are asking in the call for evidence. We will look at the evidence—we have had quite a lot of evidence submitted—and we will be responding to that point about regulation. The Justice Committee made a number of interesting recommendations and put forward some proposals, and we will of course look at those in due course as well.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I rise as co-chair of the justice unions cross-party group. The number of public sector civilian enforcement officers is less than half what it was four years ago, while private bailiff firms receive millions from the taxpayer every year, and the Government recently admitted wasting almost half a million pounds on their cancelled private bailiff procurement process. When will they admit that privatisation is not worth it and invest instead in public staff?

Lucy Frazer: Sometimes it is appropriate for the public sector to provide services; sometimes the private sector does it just as well, and sometimes better. It is appropriate to ensure that in all services we get the best service, not dictate who provides those services.

Living Wage

13. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to pay officials in his Department the living wage. [910430]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): We believe very strongly that we need to both provide decent wages for people and grow the economy and make sure we have employment, which is why we have undertaken to provide a living wage to all our direct employees, and also to our third-party employees, but we have done so—and this is where I suspect the disagreement between me and the hon. Lady lies—at a level that has led to us having the highest rates of employment on record.

Diana Johnson: Just to be clear, will the Minister state that the people who clean his offices and the security guards who keep him safe in his role as a Minister will receive the living wage, meaning that his Department's name, the Ministry of Justice, is accurate?

Rory Stewart: Yes, I absolutely can confirm that. In April, their wages will go from £7.83 to £8.21 an hour, which is the national living wage.

Prison Officer Safety

14. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What progress he has made on improving the safety of prison officers. [910431]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Protecting our prison officers is vital to having safe prisons. In order to do this, we have doubled the maximum sentence for assaulting a prison officer; we are introducing body-worn cameras; we are rolling out PAVA spray; and we are ensuring, through the training and support we provide for prison officers and the work we do on drugs, that we keep our prisons safe.

Daniel Kawczynski: A key factor in the safety of prison officers is the number of these professionals in each prison. In an earlier response, the Minister said that the number was at a higher level than in any year since 2012. What is the number of prison officers at the moment and what plans does he have to increase the number of these professionals over the next 12 months?

Rory Stewart: We now have 4,300 additional prison officers, which is the highest level since 2012.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What about 2010?

Rory Stewart: We have fewer officers than in 2010. There was a reduction from 2010 to 2012, but we have now turned that around, with the 4,300 extra officers, meaning we can now roll out the key worker programme, which is central, as it means we have the ratios we need to have one prison officer allied with four prisoners to make sure we deliver the work on rehabilitation.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The number of officers is only one part of the equation. Will the Minister increase the almost poverty pay of those in the lowest-paid jobs in the Prison Service and the courts?

Rory Stewart: We have been looking at this very carefully, and the public sector pay review body is currently gathering evidence on the situation. We owe a huge debt of obligation to our prison officers and we have to think about their salaries. We also have to balance that with making sure our resources go into improving the physical fabric of these buildings and having the right security infrastructure and the right programming in place. Looking at the resources as a whole, we think we have got the balance right, but we will listen to the public sector pay review body.

Child Sexual Abuse Victims

15. **Andrew Griffiths** (Burton) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the criminal justice system adequately supports victims of child sexual abuse. [910432]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): We are determined to ensure that support is in place for all victims of child sexual abuse. In particular, a range of special measures is available in court cases to assist and support victims of child sexual

abuse to give their best evidence in criminal proceedings, including the provision of evidence via video links, recorded evidence-in-chief, screens around the witness box and access to an independent sexual violence adviser.

Andrew Griffiths: I recognise the good work done to support victims of child sexual abuse, but access to compensation is key to that. The Minister will know that in 2017, of the 6,861 cases in which someone was found guilty of child sexual abuse, in only 26 was a criminal compensation order awarded. That is 0.4%. Will he work with me and others in the House to ensure we get victims of child sexual abuse the compensation they deserve?

Edward Argar: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the very powerful and, indeed, very personal speech that he made recently when presenting a ten-minute rule Bill on this subject. I should be happy to meet him, with my officials, to discuss this further.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Given that so many victims of child sexual abuse have spoken out about their horrendous experiences through the family courts, what consideration is being given to a full inquiry into the treatment in those courts of women and girls who have suffered domestic abuse and violence?

Edward Argar: I know that the hon. Lady speaks about this subject with passion and knowledge, and that she has championed a number of those who have suffered in the past. She has highlighted a very important point. As she will know, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), and I—along with members of the judiciary and others—are looking closely into what can be done to ensure that the family courts themselves continue to ensure that the voices of victims of child sexual abuse are heard, and that they are responded to appropriately.

Topical Questions

T1. [910433] **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): On 12 April, the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019 came into effect. It criminalises the reprehensible behaviour known as upskirting. The offences specified in the Act are framed in clear and focused terms to ensure that that disturbing practice is tackled robustly wherever it occurs, so that victims can be confident that their complaints will be taken seriously. I thank Gina Martin for leading the campaign, and I thank all Members on both sides of the House who supported this law. Together, we have sent a clear message to those who think that they can get away with such invasive and unacceptable behaviour: it will not be tolerated.

Marsha De Cordova: A staggering 72% of decisions on personal independence payments and 65% of decisions on employment and support allowance are overturned in the first-tier tribunal. That means that not only are ill and disabled people having to fight for the social security support to which they are entitled, but a great deal of money is being wasted on the administration of appeal

tribunals. May I ask the Secretary of State how much is being spent on the administration of PIP and ESA tribunals? If those figures are not recorded, will he agree to start producing them?

Mr Gauke: If I remember correctly, only 8% of awards are challenged in tribunals. As for the total cost, I will happily write to the hon. Lady providing the details.

T5. [910437] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking across Government to spread the successful best practice of organisations such as Care after Combat, which is doing brilliant work with veterans in prisons and driving down reoffending?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): I know that my hon. Friend is a committed supporter of Care after Combat. Indeed, so committed is he that he will be running the London marathon next weekend in aid of the organisation, and I gather that all sponsorship is welcome.

As a member of the ministerial covenant and veterans board, I am happy to confirm that the Government's new strategy refers explicitly to veterans in the justice system. We incorporate a wide range of military and non-military charities in our work on prisons and probation, including SSAFA, the Royal British Legion and, of course, Care after Combat, and we encourage the sharing of best practice on what works.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Climate change is now receiving the public attention that it merits. Greta Thunberg is in the House today, and my party pays tribute to her work. All too often, however, our justice system restricts the ability of citizens to take legal action against environmentally damaging decisions. Last month, the United Nations criticised the Government's failure to meet their international obligations relating to access to justice in environmental matters.

Labour's 2017 manifesto proposed the establishment of a new type of environmental tribunal with simplified procedures so that citizens would have alternatives to prohibitively expensive judicial reviews. Will the Government follow Labour's lead, and commit themselves to the establishment of a tribunal that would empower people to use our legal system to protect our shared environment?

Mr Gauke: I am not sure that setting up a new tribunal is necessarily the right response to this particular issue, but of course we want to do everything we can to ensure that the law—including the Government's ambitious climate change policies—is properly enforced.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Given that the Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Act 2018 became law last year to block mobile phone signals in prisons, could the Minister update us on the progress that has been made on introducing the technology across the prisons estate?

Mr Gauke: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she did in bringing the Bill through and turning it into an Act. It is an important piece of legislation, which extends our powers to work alongside network providers. We are taking significant steps in dealing with the security threat posed by mobile phones. We have to prevent them from getting into prisons. We have to use detection

methods to find them and stop them working, and we are making advances on that. We also need to exploit the data that is held on them.

T2. [910434] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I went to prison last week—to Downview Prison, which is a women's prison—for the Sycamore Tree course on restorative justice. Does the Minister agree that restorative justice programmes of this nature, and also those run by the Chris Donovan Trust, can have a real impact on reoffending rates and provide some comfort to victims who want to go on them by helping them to recover from a crime?

Edward Argar: Having also recently visited Downview, I know what the right hon. Gentleman is talking about, and I fully agree that restorative justice and the work of charities such as the Sycamore Tree project can have a vital role to play in making our prisons safer and more rehabilitative. Restorative approaches are already used across the youth estate and, as the right hon. Gentleman highlighted, in a number of other prisons. They have real benefits, in terms of both defusing conflict and repairing harm after an incident in prison.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I welcome the fact that a family impact test on the Government's proposed divorce law changes has been published, but what is the justification for the Government cherry-picking not just public opinion, which, according to the responses to their own consultation, is 80% against the proposed changes, but the evidence they rely on, with Ministers seeming to ignore evidence that there will be an immediate spike in divorce rates, which will impact negatively on the families involved?

Mr Gauke: I have to disagree with my hon. Friend on this point. It is true that there was a surge of submissions to our consultation in the last couple of weeks, but the fact is that a YouGov poll on the day the proposals were set out suggested 73% support for them. Indeed, we have had support from the Law Society, Resolution, the Family Law Bar Association, Sir Paul Coleridge—the chair of the Marriage Foundation—Relate and National Family Mediation. This reform will help families and ensure that the divorce process is less acrimonious.

T3. [910435] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Do the Government have any plans to change the legal system to protect against gender targeting of advertising towards children and teenagers?

Mr Gauke: We will certainly look at any proposals on this front. We do not, at the moment, have any plans, but I will certainly look at any proposals the hon. Lady might have.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I warmly welcome the commitment by the UK Government to recruit 2,500 more prison officers, because prison officers in Scotland have spoken out about the fact that the system there is at breaking point. Rising numbers have led to overcrowding in my local prison, HMP Perth, which was recently reported to rely heavily on inexperienced agency and bank nurses due to staffing shortages. Does the Minister agree that the Scottish Government need to make a similar commitment to restore order in our prison service?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is a doughty defender of the interests of her constituents. As she points out, this is a matter for the Scottish Government, but I am more than happy to share our experience with the Scottish Government if that would be helpful.

T4. [910436] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Will Ministers make a commitment today that the Domestic Abuse Bill will include guaranteed access to special measures in courts for survivors of domestic abuse and that that will apply equally across all our court systems and our entire courts estate?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As he will be aware, we have brought forward the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which we are currently considering in the Joint Committee. We would very much welcome any reflections he has as part of that process before we draft definitive legislation to bring forward to the House.

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): During an earlier answer, my hon. Friend the Prisons Minister mentioned the roll-out of PAVA spray. When will it be completed?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I am delighted to be able to remind the House that PAVA spray is an incapacitating spray and that it can be safer, when dealing with acts of extreme violence, to use a spray rather than pulling out a baton or rolling around with someone on the ground. We need to use these sprays in a moderate, controlled fashion, but they can reduce extreme violence in prisons and protect our prison officers, so we are proud to be rolling them out.

T6. [910438] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): In South Tyneside, disabled claimants are having to wait over 12 months for a tribunal, and 80% of those appeals are successful. What discussions have the Minister and the Department had with the Department for Work and Pensions about this flawed decision making?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am happy to answer the hon. Gentleman's question. I met the previous Minister for Disabled People twice to talk about how the DWP can get decisions right first time, and I have already spoken to the new Minister to follow up on those discussions. There were 3.8 million decisions made on the personal independence payment in the last year, of which only 10% were appealed and only 5% overturned. However, it is absolutely fundamental that the decisions should be got right first time and that only those that are more questionable should come through the system.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Ah, a Lincolnshire knight, and an illustrious member of the Privy Council to boot—we are doubly blessed. I call Sir Edward Leigh.

Sir Edward Leigh: Having pissed off half our supporters by botching Brexit, why are we now irritating the other half with an extreme liberal social agenda? Every single study, including the Harvard Law reform and the Margaret Brinig studies, shows that it is poor, vulnerable and

dispossessed children who suffer most from divorce. Will my right hon. Friend at least accept that if he makes something easier, it will happen more often?

Mr Gauke: The evidence on no-fault divorce is that in a steady state there is not a higher rate of divorce than otherwise. It is also the case that the current fault-based approach to divorce results in divorces that are going to happen anyway being more acrimonious than they would otherwise have been. That is why I believe that it is right that we make this reform.

T7. [910440] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Health Minister will soon be meeting the parents in Hull affected by the baby ashes scandal, including mothers who do not know how their babies' bodies were transported from hospital with no coffin, no funeral director and no funeral service for the family. Does this not yet again show the need for the local independent inquiry that is still being sought by those parents, and was it not unwise for the Ministry of Justice to accept the assurances of Hull City Council that the parents' concerns had all been dealt with, without asking the parents?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Lady raises an important and sensitive point, and I would be happy to meet her to discuss the issue.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Education is at the very heart of rehabilitation. What are Ministers doing to ensure that people have access to education and the jobs they need when they leave prison?

Rory Stewart: The big change that has been introduced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is to ensure that education in prison is linked to employment. This involves talking to the local job market, ensuring that we provide the skills that match that market and, above all, ensuring that we have safe, decent prisons so that we can remove the prisoners from their cells and into work and education so that we can get them into jobs. That reduces reoffending by an average of 7%.

T8. [910451] **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): How are we getting on with securing the 26 prisoner transfer agreements that are currently in place with the European Union to ensure that they are in place at the end of this year?

Rory Stewart: I am delighted that Labour Members are working with us to try to get a good Brexit deal in place, and if we can get such a deal, we will be able to continue through the transition period. In a no-deal situation, however, it will become significantly more difficult because we will have to fall back on older and more cumbersome ways of moving prisoners. That would not be good for us or for Europe.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Despite the wilful destruction of thousands of small businesses by their own bank, no senior executive has ever been held to account. Will the Minister update the House on the Government's proposals to bring forward legislation to make failure to prevent fraud a corporate criminal offence?

Lucy Frazer: Of course, when people suffer economic crime it is as devastating for them as it is with any other crime. As my hon. Friend will know, we put out a call for evidence and we are looking carefully at the responses across the Departments. We will be responding in due course.

T9. [910452] **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): The number of recorded child sexual abuse offences increased by 178% between March 2007 and March 2017. Can the Minister explain how his Government's substantial cuts to the MOJ, the CPS and, of course, the police have helped victims achieve justice?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I know that she has a sustained interest in this area. She will be aware that we increased funding for specialist rape and sexual abuse support services, including for child sexual abuse, from April this year. That means a 10% increase in funding, a move to three-year rather than annual settlements, and support for 96 centres across England and Wales—the highest number that the MOJ has ever funded—ensuring that support services are available in each of the police and crime commissioner areas.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The law regarding the sentencing of offenders has grown piecemeal and become ever more complex, even for experienced judges and practitioners. Bearing that in mind and noting that comparatively uncontroversial legislation is being sought for a future Queen's Speech, would not paving legislation for the Law Commission's sentencing code consolidation Bill absolutely fit the bill?

Mr Gauke: The Chair of the Justice Committee makes a good point. There is cross-party support on the matter, and I hope that we can make progress in the not-too-distant future.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): In 2010, the then Secretary of State for Justice said that he wanted to examine what could be done to use technology more effectively so that fewer people have physically to attend court for routine purposes. Nine years on, however, this Government have admitted to not collecting information on how many times video links break down; nor have they published the business case for their modernisation programme. Will Ministers commit to undertaking that research before proceeding with any more closures or cuts to our courts?

Lucy Frazer: There are a number of developments relating to the use of technology to ensure that people do not have to attend court or fill in lengthy, unwieldy documentation. People can now apply for divorce and for probate online, and users can be updated about social security claims through their mobile phone. We piloted online tax tribunal hearings, which were extremely effective, and we are now piloting further video hearings in the civil courts.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Of the 9,000 foreign national prisoners in our jails, 760 are from Albania. What are we doing to negotiate a compulsory prisoner transfer agreement with Albania?

Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend has raised this matter several times, and I recently met with the Albanian Minister of Justice. It is difficult to return prisoners to Albania. We are ahead of the Italians and the Greeks, but we still have a lot more to do. The problem is that

the host country needs to receive these prisoners, so we cannot transfer prisoners in a compulsory fashion. I assure my hon. Friend, because he has asked this question in the past, that a no-deal Brexit will make such prisoner transfers not easier, but more difficult.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Three of the four men convicted of killing my constituent Jacqueline Wileman were on probation at the time of her death. Does the Minister recognise that that demonstrates the devastating failure of the privatised probation system? Will he meet with me to discuss both the case and how to prevent similar deaths, including by removing the maximum sentence for death by dangerous driving?

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her campaigning on this issue. This was a tragic case involving death by dangerous driving, and the individuals have now received sentences of between 10 and 13 and a half years for the crime. We fully support the idea that the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving should be increased up to a life sentence, but we still need to maintain a basic distinction in law between people who intend to commit murder and people whose actions lead to the horrible situation of loss of life through gross negligence and carelessness. We support the idea, and I will meet the hon. Lady.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I have met many excellent prison officers who serve at HMP Long Lartin in my constituency and elsewhere, but way too many of them seem to leave to pursue careers elsewhere. What more can be done to retain more prison officers?

Rory Stewart: In order to retain people in the job, we need to make sure that we have the right salary rates and that our prisons are safer. However, we also need to make sure that people feel motivated and that their morale is good, which is one of the reasons why the training and support packages we have introduced should transform retention rates for prison staff.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Two Members have been standing for some time, and I am keen to accommodate them. I feel sure they will agree that a sentence each seems fair.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Street & Arrow is a social enterprise street food project and is part of Scotland's violence reduction unit. It hires people with convictions for 12 months, mentors them and provides them with wraparound support. Does the Minister agree that such support is the best way to reduce reoffending?

Rory Stewart: Obviously I must pay tribute to the extraordinary achievements, particularly in Glasgow, on reducing violence. On my recent visit to the United States, I also picked up things we could do to work with ex-gang members to interrupt the cycle of violence and have a rapid impact, but we can certainly learn from Scotland on this issue.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must move on.

Climate Action and Extinction Rebellion

3.41 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I call the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) to ask his urgent question, I want, I hope on behalf of all colleagues across the House, to welcome Greta Thunberg, an enthusiastic and dedicated environmental campaigner who is with us today.

I, as Speaker, am very conscious that there are different views on these matters and different views on the matter of tactics in campaigning, but I think, across the House, we all believe in encouraging young people to stand up and speak up, to say what they think and to make their concerns known, so it was a pleasure for me, among other colleagues, to welcome Greta this morning. Greta, it was a pleasure to meet you, and I hope you enjoy listening to these exchanges.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth if she will make a statement on climate action and Extinction Rebellion.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I hope not to try the patience of the House—I will be making a further statement on this topic later this afternoon—but I want to take this opportunity to join you, Mr Speaker, in welcoming Ms Thunberg and her team to the United Kingdom Parliament. We tried very hard to meet her personally but, despite the best efforts of our diaries, we could not do it. I know she has met many Members of the House of Commons today, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Watching the protests over the past few days, both here and globally, has raised slightly mixed emotions in me. First, there is excitement that the conversations that many of us were having about climate change 30 years ago are finally moving from niche to mainstream. The question is not “Why act?” but “How fast can we act?”

Secondly, we completely understand the brilliant scientific evidence base, the motivation and the commitment that are driving people across the world to make their views known, but I worry that many of the messages we are hearing ignore the progress that is being made and, as such, make people fearful for the future, rather than hopeful.

Here in the UK, thanks to excellent cross-party working, we were the first country in the world to pass a climate change Act. We have led the world in reducing the carbon intensity of our economy over the past 40 years. We have made huge progress on plastics-free activity. Last month, renewables contributed over 40% of our electricity supply. In fact, just this last weekend we had our longest ever period of no coal contributing to electricity generation in the UK; and we now have more than 400,000 people working in the low-carbon economy.

Of course we share the desire to raise this country's ambition, which is why we asked our independent Committee on Climate Change to advise us on how best to reach our net zero target—we were the first industrialised country to ask for that advice. I am also pleased to welcome the cross-party support for our bid to host the crucial United Nations climate change talks next year.

I have to say that, although the protests have been respectful and good natured, they have caused disruption for many hundreds of thousands of hard-working Londoners, and they have required a heavy policing presence. I thank the police—I think we should all agree on that—for their professionalism and for their proportionate response, especially over the holiday weekend.

We know we need to continue and accelerate the decarbonisation of our economy, across all aspects of activity, and crucially to help other countries around the world, especially those not at the same stage of economic development as us. That is going to require a broad-based, engaged, informed debate to deliver the low-carbon progress we need; this must be fair, just and progressive, and able to be shared. I am pleased to say that our progress to date has been supported by all political parties, and I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his great leadership and continued support in this area. Our work has been supported by all political parties in the UK, and I hope we can continue to work together to drive the changes we must make in order to secure our future. We have to secure the future of planet A, because there is no planet B.

Edward Miliband: I thank the Minister for her reply.

People can believe that the tactics of Extinction Rebellion are right or wrong—the Minister obviously believes they are wrong—but the demonstrators are certainly not wrong about the failure of politics to do anything like what is necessary to fight climate change: they are right. She said in her reply that we have made progress as a country, and I thank her for what she said about me, but the truth is that the planet is warming far faster than we are acting. Even the path-breaking Paris commitments will take us way beyond the disaster of 2°C of warming, as the Minister knows. The truth is that climate change is not some theoretical future prospect; it is with us here and now, with wildfires, droughts and floods. We have been warned by the scientists: it will get far worse if we do not act with much greater urgency. In these circumstances, it is no wonder people are disrupting the traffic and schoolchildren are striking. The response from Government cannot simply be to restore order and say they are doing a good job. The only credible answer of democratic politics in response to these protests is to admit that we need to raise our game and show we can act.

May I therefore ask the Minister today to commit to the following four actions as a down-payment on what is necessary? First, will she seek to persuade the Prime Minister to declare a climate emergency, as many local authorities have done, in order to focus minds across Government on the centrality of this issue to every Department, not just hers? Goodness knows that is necessary, because we know from the figures that came out just before Easter that the Government are woefully behind in meeting the fourth and fifth carbon budgets covering the next decade.

Secondly, the Minister is to be commended for asking the Committee on Climate Change to recommend a date when the UK will need to hit zero emissions, which it will do next week, but these recommendations cannot be allowed to get buried in Whitehall. So will she now commit to responding formally to them before the summer recess? Only by Britain showing world leadership again, quickly, can we hope to persuade other countries to act.

Thirdly, will the Minister commit to working on the delivery of a British green new deal at scale, which could have the effect of giving work to hundreds of thousands of people across our country, for example, in retrofitting buildings, and showing beyond doubt that economic justice and climate justice go together?

Fourthly and finally, will she take up the idea of Extinction Rebellion and others to involve the public in these discussions about both the threat of climate change and the action necessary—and, yes, the trade-offs—with a process of citizen deliberation? For too long—this covers both parties—people have been shut out of the climate debate and made to feel powerless. That must change.

I wish to make one final point. Greta Thunberg, who is with us today in the Public Gallery, said this:

“I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.”

She is right. If we do not act, people will say in the future, “You knew the facts, but you did not care enough.” We will be known as the generations with the knowledge of what was to come but without the will or imagination to prevent it. We will be condemned, and rightly so. The right response to rebellion on our streets is to produce a revolution in climate leadership, and the time for action is now.

Claire Perry: In the right hon. Gentleman’s remarks we hear the passion that he has brought to this portfolio for many years, and I share that passion. Let me correct him: I do not disagree with the protests. I disagree with some of the methods, but certainly not with the message. As I have said to him before, I think that just a few years previously he and I would have been out there ourselves carrying placards.

Let me pick up on the challenges the right hon. Gentleman talked about. He is right to acknowledge that the Government were bold to ask for advice on a net zero economy—we are the first industrialised economy to do so. I will consider that advice carefully and proportionally and, crucially, I will work out how we are going to pay for it. He will know from his time in his climate change role that the Committee on Climate Change was unable to recommend a net zero target when previously we asked for that advice, because the committee did not believe it could be done cost-effectively or, indeed, that we had the technology. It is right that we give that work the focus that it requires.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that we need to take a whole-of-Government approach. I was really pleased to see the Chancellor stand up and make the first ever green financial statement, in which he brought forward some extremely ambitious programmes to ensure that from 2025 no new homes will be built in this country that rely on fossil-fuel heating.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the declaration of a climate emergency. The thing is, I do not know what that would entail. I could stand here and say, “I believe there is a climate emergency,” and he could say that, too. Many of our local councils, including my own council in Wiltshire, have done that. The question is: what are we going to do about it? That is why we should be proud of the fact that we have the most detailed proposals for how we will hit our carbon budgets.

I will answer the right hon. Gentleman’s point about carbon budgets in a moment, but he needs to look, as I am sure he has, at what other Governments have done. It is the easiest thing in the world for a politician to stand up and say, “I’m going to do this and I’m going to set these targets,” knowing that they will be dead and buried before the targets have to be met. The responsible thing to do is to put in place legislation, as the right hon. Gentleman did, to bind every successive Minister who comes along to meet the budgets, or to explain why they are not met, and to hold every future Government’s feet to the fire—as he says, it often is a fire—in respect of how we deliver on our ambition.

The right hon. Gentleman made a point about carbon budgets. He will know that we are not woefully far off: we are at 95% and 93% of the way to being where we need to be to meet the budgets that end in seven and 12 years. And that is without even costing or calculating the carbon savings that we will have from the homes changes we have made. This is an ongoing process and we are absolutely committed to delivering.

I take the right hon. Gentleman’s point about citizens’ assemblies. The wonderful thing is that everybody can talk about this issue. A national conversation is now happening. We have to engage with citizens, businesses, politicians, local authorities, bill payers and taxpayers—with everybody—because there is not one single thing that will move the dial. We have to change everything, do it rapidly and do it in a way such that no future Government can wriggle out of their responsibilities.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In this policy area, it is most important that everything is based on the best possible science. I am sure we would all agree about that. What is the Government’s view on the likely changes in water-vapour levels and cloud cover, and on levels of solar radiation? Those are also important matters.

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend is right. As a newly appointed fellow of the Royal Geographical Society—I had to get that in there—he will know that we have some of the best climate modelling in the world. The problem we have is that the planet is an unbelievably complicated ecosystem. We are finding some feedback loops that we did not even realise about: for example, what happens to the Thwaites glacier in Antarctica could have a meaningful impact on our sea levels immediately. We have the best scientific evidence base we have ever had. The 1.5° report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was based on the best peer-reviewed science the world has ever seen. We have the message from our scientists; we must now continue to act.

Mr Speaker: Who is the newly appointed fellow of the Royal Geographical Society—the right hon. Lady or the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood)?

Claire Perry: That would be me, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Oh, many congratulations to the right hon. Lady.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): She’s blowing her own trumpet!

Mr Speaker: Well, if she does not blow it, it may well be that nobody else will blow the trumpet. It is perfectly right that we offer her the warmest congratulations on that new acknowledgement.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) for his timely question.

The right to protest is one of the foundations of our freedom. From the Chartists to the suffragettes, and from the civil rights movement to the anti-apartheid campaign, all those victories were won by citizens uniting against injustice and making their voice heard. Extinction Rebellion and the school climate strikers are doing just that. I, too, thank the police for the way they have policed the demonstrations: on the whole, they have done so with good humour. I was delighted to meet the demonstrators at Marble Arch yesterday and I thank them for speaking the truth.

Many of us listened to Greta Thunberg earlier today. She spoke about truth—the truth that we are in the midst of an ecological and climate emergency. She also spoke about our refusal—our fear—to acknowledge the truth that stopping this catastrophe requires a complete rethink in the way we run our economy, so that GDP growth is no longer the touchstone. We are on track for catastrophic levels of global warming, yet in the UK we pride ourselves on the 40% reduction in emissions that we say we have achieved on 1990 levels, while achieving a 72% increase in GDP. But the truth is out there. Schoolchildren are teaching it to us. Those figures do not include aviation or shipping emissions. They do not include our imports, our exports and they have largely come from the clean power directive in the European Union, which forced us to announce an end to coal-fired power stations. That is why thousands of our schoolchildren are on climate strike: they know that we are not acting with the speed and seriousness that the climate emergency demands.

Therefore, I ask the Minister: will she listen to the voice of Extinction Rebellion and of our own children? I echo the call from my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North: will she join my party in declaring a national environmental and climate emergency and commit to bringing forward the Government's response to the Committee on Climate Change's recommendations, which will be published shortly, to achieve net zero urgently? Will she do more to engage with the public in tackling the climate crisis, because it is clear that our citizens need to be in the driving seat for a sustainable future? Will she work with Treasury colleagues and the Bank of England to address what Mark Carney has identified as climate-related financial risks and make the emissions curve and natural capital the key elements of our future economic viability? We know that, however disruptive the climate demonstrations may have been in this past few weeks to businesses, they pale into insignificance against the capacity of climate disasters to wipe out human prosperity and human life itself.

Claire Perry: I just want to pick up on a couple of factual points. First, I entirely share the hon. Gentleman's commitment to the right to protest. It is a wonderful, wonderful freedom that we have and one that we should use judiciously. I know that he and I have both done so.

On the point about coal, it is not the case that other countries across the EU are phasing out coal. In fact, when I was at the climate change talks in Bonn, it was shocking to see the barges of dirty Ruhr coal floating down the Rhine because Germany took an ideological decision to phase out nuclear power. For us to get to zero now—it will be zero completely by 2025—is a huge achievement for an island that is built on coal and surrounded by fish and that had 40% of its energy generation coming from coal in 2010 when I was elected. That has been done not by the climate directive, but by unilateral policy decisions taken by the coalition Government and continued by my Government. That is how we will continue to lead the world—by taking tough decisions, hopefully with cross-party support, to make the differences that we need but that we can then accelerate around the world. Our leadership on coal has enabled me and my counterpart in Canada to set up the global Powering Past Coal Alliance—an alliance of 80-plus countries, cities and companies that have all committed to phase out coal thanks to the UK's leadership.

I also want to reassure the hon. Gentleman. He made a brilliant point about natural capital accounting, which will be formal Government policy by 2020. I join him in paying tribute to the work of the Bank of England and the Governor, Mark Carney, who have identified the challenge for investors and companies, and indeed for regulators, if there is not proper accounting for climate risk disclosure—again, an area where we have continued to innovate and lead the world.

I am delighted to share many of the points that the hon. Gentleman made, but I do believe fundamentally that a market-based economy that delivers rapidly reducing costs of technology and innovation—the sort of innovation that has seen the price of offshore wind tumble over the last two years—is the way to go. I will look with great interest at the advice that we get from the Committee on Climate Change and act as soon as is proportionate and possible.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is not just the protesters on the streets or the children coming to our offices who are raising this matter; this issue is being talked of around kitchen tables, among families whom we represent. The worst way to reflect those concerns—whoever they are from—would be for our Opposition parties to say, “The Government are not doing enough” and for us to say, “Look at all the things we're doing.” I therefore absolutely concur with the Minister's cross-party consensus on this matter. Does she agree that we should applaud the fact that this country is not like the United States, where this is a polarised political issue? This is an issue on which we, as a Parliament working together, can actually move the dial. The Minister has made some really good points, as have the Opposition. Does she agree that, on this issue, we really can reflect the needs and wishes of the people out there through the consensual nature of our debate?

Claire Perry: I very much thank my right hon. Friend for his work as a Minister, particularly on waterways and rivers. This issue is not simply about the air or the biosphere. It is about the whole planet—all the ecosystems working together. He made an incredible amount of progress with that portfolio. Of course he is right. People look at us and see us filling this place with hot

air over the three-year forward look regarding our relationship with the European Union, and then they see this place when we are debating these portfolios. In my time as a Minister, this is the fullest I have ever seen the Chamber when we have debated these matters. *[Interruption.]* Well, there have been very few Members on the Opposition Benches previously as well. People are right to look at us and say, “What are you going to do, working together across parties?” and to ask what role organisations such as the Youth Parliament can play—that is, whether there are organisations and assemblies which already include young people that can help us to make progress with the issue.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): We welcome the fact that the Extinction Rebellion protests have largely been peaceful and non-violent in nature, and that so many of those protesting have been young, concerned activists, including Greta Thunberg from Sweden and Holly Gillibrand, whom I met today and who has led climate action protests in her home town of Fort William in Scotland; I welcome both of them here today. Along with other young activists, they have travelled here to meet the leaders of the Opposition parties to discuss how to respond to climate change. Given that the Prime Minister has yet to meet these young adults, will she take the time this week to discuss this vital issue with them? After all, it is our collective responsibility and the UK Government must show leadership.

Scotland continues to outperform the UK and is world-leading in its low-carbon transition, with figures showing that emissions in Scotland are down 49% since 1990, as opposed to 38% for the UK as a whole. Will the Minister join me in welcoming these figures from Scotland, and will she commit to increased, faster and deeper efforts by her Government to help the UK’s figures to come into line with Scotland’s?

Claire Perry: The good news is that all the devolved Administrations and the Westminster Government have worked incredibly hard on the low-carbon transition. It is a joint project; we calculate on a joint account. Of course, the taxpayer subsidies that have gone into so much of the energy generation system, helping Scotland with its transition, have come from UK taxpayers and UK tax policy.

I cannot speak for the diary of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, but I am always delighted to meet groups of people, as is the Environment Minister. As I have said, we worked really hard today to try to get our diaries to mesh with the plans of the groups coming here and we offered various meetings, but apparently they were not available at those times. It is a total pleasure to meet people to discuss these issues. Like so many other Members, I am sure, I only have to go home to hear my own children telling me what more we need to do and asking whether they should take part in the protests. I say to them, “Wouldn’t it just be easier to tell mum what you want over a cup of tea?” but it is more fun for them to protest. We genuinely have to listen and move on this issue, and we will continue to do so.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): It is a testament to my constituents—young, old, of no religion, of any religion, whatever shape and size—that they have come to me about the environment. This is an overridingly

important issue for everybody. Sustainability should be at the heart of every Government Department, and cross-party should be the name of the game. If we can do one really positive thing to reverse climate change, it will be to reduce our emissions to net zero, and to do so fast. I take my hat off to the Minister for going to the Committee on Climate Change and for asking for its advice on how we could possibly address this more quickly than our targets. The committee’s advice was that we could not do so by 2050. I am hopeful that it will change its mind. Will she please update us on that and will she tell us when aviation and shipping might be included, as they need to be?

Claire Perry: To answer in reverse order, there has been progress made on aviation and shipping. That continues to be an international challenge because flights and ships leave and take off from different places, but there is work accelerating on it, and indeed some investment going into low-carbon fuels, which could be hugely important. I will happily update the House when we have received the net zero report and talk about the various aspects in that. We are investing in the first net zero industrial cluster in the UK, with £170 million of funding from the industrial strategy challenge fund. As my hon. Friend has reminded me, it is not just the young who are protesting: one of the most effective and wide-scale campaigning organisations in the UK in this area is the Women’s Institute, which has over 9,000 climate ambassadors. This is a problem that affects all of us, and the solution will involve all of us.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I thank Greta Thunberg and the climate strikers, and Extinction Rebellion, for showing more climate leadership on the streets than we often see in this Chamber. The Minister says that she does not know what a climate emergency looks like. It looks like doing what is scientifically necessary, not just what is deemed to be politically possible at the time. In that spirit, in the meeting this morning that unfortunately the Prime Minister could not clear her diary to make but all the Opposition leaders did, we agreed a number of proposals, including things like ongoing dialogue with the UK climate strikers and stress testing all new manifesto commitments to make sure that they do not exceed the 1.5° warming target. Will the Minister’s Government sign up to those practical proposals?

Claire Perry: I do not want to politicise diaries, because of course invitations were issued, as the hon. Lady is well aware, that could not be accepted. We are not going to go into that sort of political tit for tat that takes us down a rabbit hole of conflict that this situation does not need. I have debated with the hon. Lady many times, and I frequently pay tribute to her for her passion and commitment and leadership of her party, but just once—just once—she could stand up and acknowledge the fact that the country she is proud to represent has led the world—

Caroline Lucas *indicated dissent.*

Claire Perry: She is shaking her head. She cannot even acknowledge that the UK has led the world in this particular area. If we cannot acknowledge our leadership, and celebrate that, how can we possibly hope to persuade

[*Claire Perry*]

other countries that emit far more carbon than us, and have a far greater land area, that they should be making the changes that they also need to make?

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): While I have no time for those who deny climate change, I also have little time for those who deny that great progress has been made. If we have 40% of our electricity from renewables, which is up from 6% in 2010, is it not important that we listen to and work with our scientists and innovators who can improve this picture rather than just listening to those who lie down on the streets?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think that this debate is about consumption emissions. I will not take the House through the technicalities, but essentially there is an argument that we have exported much of our heavy energy-creating activities. It is also the case, as people will see if they peruse the base numbers, that our consumption emissions are down by 20% since, I believe, 1997. I will check those facts before the next statement. The whole world's economic systems are changing. That is why the leadership that we display will help other countries to which much of this activity has been transferred also to make these changes—in particular, to have a low-carbon electricity system as this is often the greatest cause of emissions in those countries.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister put her finger on it when she said that this is going to be about some tough decisions. She expressed concern about describing this as a climate emergency because what she really wanted to do was to move the dial. Ireland has been able to move the dial not by leaving the public out on the streets but by bringing them into a citizens' assembly—a proper citizens' assembly that hears the views not just of the activists but of everyone. That has supported carbon taxes and an end to subsidies for peat extraction, meaning that Ireland is now the first country to divest from fossil fuel. Will the Minister meet me and others who are supportive of the idea of a citizens' assembly to talk about whether that is the cross-party, cross-country way forward by which we can actually tackle this climate emergency?

Claire Perry: With pleasure. I point out to the hon. Lady that we already have a carbon tax. We introduced a unilateral tax on carbon emissions, which is what has driven us off coal. She does not seem to realise what an achievement that is. When she and I were elected, 40% of our electricity system was coal-based. Of course I will meet her, but let us look at what has worked and see how we can do more of that.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the 2017 PwC report which shows that the United Kingdom is the fastest decarbonising nation of the G7? Can she tell us how the Government are supporting new technologies, such as the use of hydrogen to heat domestic homes in the Keele University experiment, and what further steps can be taken to promote geothermal energy in Clackmannanshire?

Claire Perry: I welcome my hon. Friend's mentioning an independent report which shows that we have decarbonised, as a proportion of our economic growth, faster than any other country in not just the G7 but the G20. We continue to work to accelerate our carbon reduction. He is right to focus on heating, which is a major problem for a centralised gas-based heating economy such as ours. Innovation is happening in Keele, Leeds and other areas to see how we might safely introduce hydrogen into the heating system. Of course, we then have to produce hydrogen in a low-carbon emissions form, which is an opportunity to use excess renewable energy, and particularly offshore wind. This is an incredibly innovative time. By the way, if we can help the world migrate to hydrogen boilers and make those boilers in the UK, we can export them and create a competitive advantage as part of this transition.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Looking at the climate science, I do not suppose that a single Member of the House does not ask themselves, "How can we make the changes that are needed?" The Minister will be aware that the Committee on Climate Change said in November that emissions from homes are off track and we will need to replace gas with hydrogen boilers and supplementary electric heating. Given that about 80% of homes depend on gas for heating or cooking, how will that change happen?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman is right to emphasise homes, although they are responsible for only 15% of our CO₂ emissions. In fact, the biggest nut we have to crack is industrial emissions, which is arguably much harder to do. There will be no one-size-fits-all policy on homes. There will be some decarbonisation of gas, some introduction of pure hydrogen, a move to electrification and a use of community heating or heat networks. Some amazingly innovative local authorities—Nottingham and Leeds spring to mind—are trying to design new forms of heating system into their local economies and home building programmes. That is how we will innovate and drive the cost down. I think that the announcement of no fossil fuel heating in new homes from 2025 will kick-start a revolution, particularly in reducing the cost of alternatives such as heat pumps.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The protests last week did not greatly inconvenience my constituents, but many of them, like me, share the concerns about the grave emissions situation we face. I do not think that panicking ever helped any situation, but does the excellent Minister agree that if we are going to do our bit on these small islands, we have to face up to the poor energy efficiency of our existing homes? We will need a new green deal, as the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) said. The Minister can call it whatever she likes, but we will need a retrofit new green deal if we are going to move the dial—that seems to be the expression of the afternoon—and lower emissions.

Claire Perry: I cannot disagree with my hon. Friend that the focus on retrofitting is hugely important. He and I put ourselves on the green deal Bill Committee because we believed there was a way to incentivise people—if someone retrofits their home, their energy bills go down, and they often get a higher sale price or a lower running cost.

We have to work in all sectors. There will continue to be an element of Government investment. We are working with mortgage lenders. There is evidence that offering a green mortgage pays for itself, because people can borrow more cheaply and get a better rate of return. There have to be many ways of doing this. In constituencies like mine, many homes are not suitable for traditional retrofit technologies such as cavity wall insulation. That is why part of the £2.6 billion we are spending on innovation over this Parliament has to go into finding solutions for such homes.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister is right that there are some sectors, such as power generation, in which major progress has been made in carbon reduction, but does she agree that there are others, such as aviation, where virtually nothing is taking place? Does she agree that the Government should re-examine major expansion projects such as Heathrow specifically to look at the climate change implications?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me into another Department's area. I have to say that I believe that most of the emissions problems with this specific aviation project relate to transport to and from the airport, and clearly there is much more that can be done on that with the Department for Transport. Equally, however, we have to look at how we try to solve the aviation problem globally. Again, there is no point trying to do something unilaterally that disadvantages the UK economy, when we could be working to solve the problem. One of the things the Department has been doing is investing in alternative fuels, in many cases created from the waste products of other processes, and that is the sort of innovation we need to see because unless we can drop the emissions from aviation substantially, we will not be on track.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The science is clear that we need to stop pumping more emissions into the climate. I thank the Minister for spending time with the Science and Technology Committee today and answering very detailed questions on the Government's policy. Does she agree with the other four experts before the Committee that the UK has led the world in investment in innovative technology, such as carbon capture and storage, and does she agree with me and many colleagues that the UK should continue to lead the world in investment in innovative technologies to help find solutions to this situation?

Claire Perry: I thank my hon. Friend for raising carbon capture and storage. Members will know that a competition was run several years ago, and it was a rather crude, as it were, point-to-point competition—in one case, it was just decarbonising a coal plant that would in effect no longer be generating power. We are now trying to work out how carbon capture, usage and storage are embedded in an industrial cluster, so that we can actually decarbonise heavy industry and create a way of sequestering the carbon alongside clean power generation. This is how I think we will solve the problems: not looking at them in economic silos, but trying to solve these problems on a whole-economy basis.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The global food system accounts for 30% of emissions, and it is said that without any action—if we do not do anything about it—food and farming will take up the whole of

the Paris carbon emissions budget, so why is no one talking about it? I have been sitting here listening to this, and I have sat here listening to many of these debates, and I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of parliamentarians who are ever prepared to ask what we are going to do about the global food system.

Claire Perry: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who has been walking the vegan walk now for many years and has been a doughty campaigner. She is absolutely right: CO₂ emissions from land use and farming will continue to rise precipitously unless we have changes both in the way we treat soil—she will know about the UK's plans for improving carbon sequestration in soil—and in how we farm. Unfortunately, the challenge is also about how we feed the world cost-effectively, and we need to continue to look at technological solutions for that, but she is right to focus on this. I find that this and the industrial emissions bit are the parts that people very rarely talk about, so I thank her for raising this issue.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): The Minister is right to raise the effect that this Government have had on emissions, particularly from the power sector. I am sure she will remember that, during the Labour leadership campaign of 2015, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said he wanted to reopen the coalmines. He went on to win the leadership—it was a very popular policy—and a couple of months later he clarified that he wanted to reopen only one coalmine in south Wales. Will the Minister update the House on how the Leader of the Opposition's campaign to reopen the coalmines is going?

Claire Perry: I was not at the Durham miners' gala where those pledges were made, but, with the exception of some Opposition Members, I think there is general cross-party support for phasing out coal, which is the dirtiest form of fossil fuel, as a power-generation source. Unfortunately, the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition is also, I believe, against nuclear power, so that would leave an awfully big hole in the thermal generation part of the energy system.

I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who will know from his own constituency of Selby and Ainsty that some of these transitions can be difficult, involving job losses. This is why it is such a challenge for other countries, and why the transition we have to make has to be just and fair, and has to ensure that people's jobs are maintained and new jobs are created.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister asks what would be the point of her declaring a climate change emergency. Well, it is because it is an emergency. It is an emergency right now and it is an emergency across the world—glaciers are melting, seas are rising—and the Minister knows this. I just do not understand, and I do not think people watching or my constituents in Bristol West will understand, what is stopping her declaring a climate change emergency and then treating the problem as an emergency.

Claire Perry: Let me try to help the hon. Lady and her constituents. I do not see the point of saying anything unless we take action to solve the problem. We are now realising that we have a massive, growing problem with

[*Claire Perry*]

our global emissions, affecting the balance of our economy. We in this country lead the world in trying to solve this problem. I accept that we need to go further and faster, but I want to focus on actions rather than simply standing here and saying, “I have said a few things—job done.” Let us focus on actions, not words.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Exactly; so having instituted the fastest decarbonisation of any G20 country, will the Minister remind the House what proportion of total global emissions we produce—I think it is 1%—compared with, say, China? We all know what would happen to an Extinction Rebellion demonstration in Tiananmen Square. If we want to make a real difference, what practical steps are we taking internationally to encourage China, the USA and India to take real action?

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend is right to point out that we make up only 3% of the world’s land area and we rank 17th for carbon emissions. If he will forgive me, however, his suggestion is a little bit of a false choice, because much of our growth and prosperity has been caused by putting the CO₂ up there in the first place. I think that it is very unfair to say to countries that they cannot enjoy future growth unless they are prepared drastically to cut their standard of living.

The point is that we must work together. I pay tribute to many of the actions that have been taken in China and India, where some of the most rapid investments are being made in electric vehicles and renewable energy. That is the reason why solar panel prices have dropped more than 80% in the UK; we no longer need to subsidise them because of other countries’ investments. My right hon. Friend is right to point out that we must work together. A CO₂ molecule does not care where it is emitted from, or where it is going. We are all contributing to the problem, and we must contribute to the solution.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Many of the businesses, citizens and workers who have had their lives disrupted over the past week by protesters—some of whom flew thousands of miles in CO₂-emitting aeroplanes to cause roadblocks, which led to more CO₂ emissions, and then arrogantly threatened to disrupt the Easter holidays of many hard-working families—will be amazed by some of the attitudes expressed in this House today. Will the Minister tell us why police actions that have been used against previous disruptive protests in London were not used on this occasion? Was it because of Government direction, the Mayor of London or a decision taken by the police?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman makes a strong point. I pay tribute to the response of the Met police, under its commissioner; the right hon. Gentleman will have seen the response today. I think there was a little bit of nervousness at the beginning of the process, unfortunately, led by the Mayor of London, who did not recognise that millions of people’s lives would be disrupted. [*Interruption.*] Hang on a minute; Members are moaning and whinging, but what is the point of stopping people using electric public transport so that they have to take cars? That seems utterly counterintuitive.

We ended up with a proportionate response, and I pay tribute once again to the police, who acted in a very good-humoured way to confine the protests.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is imperative to reduce greenhouse gases, and the replacement of coal by natural gas has vastly reduced such gases. Does the Minister agree that we should back a responsible UK oil and gas sector, and not offshore our climate change responsibility?

Claire Perry: I do, and my hon. Friend will know, as do many of his Conservative colleagues, that the incredible contribution of the oil and gas sector to the Scottish economy cannot be overstated. He will also know that we can decarbonise gas very effectively, and, frankly, we produce it with environmental standards far higher than those in the countries from which we import.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): After all that the Minister has had to say today, why are the Government still in favour of fracking?

Claire Perry: The two things are entirely linked. We are a highly gas-dependent economy, as we know. We want to cut the amount of gas that we use, but it is a good transitional fuel. The hon. Gentleman always shouts over me, which is very rude. We want to explore soberly and scientifically whether there are opportunities to extract gas onshore in a way that helps us with our energy security—something he used to care about, when he was mining the black stuff all those years ago—and helps us to generate jobs. Why is it that we trust the science on climate change, but when science says that shale gas extraction is safe, we refuse to listen?

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The environment is important to all of us in the Kettering constituency, which is one of the greenest boroughs in the whole country, with 30 very large wind turbines generating almost as much electricity as is consumed by all the residential houses. I am concerned, however. While we must of course allow people to protest and this is a very important issue, I do object, on behalf of many thousands of my constituents, to encouraging schoolchildren to go on strike. It is important for schoolchildren to have strong views on topical issues, but why can they not protest at the weekend? Education is very important.

Claire Perry: It is a very serious point. Ms Thunberg’s efforts, which have become a global phenomenon, demonstrate the power of a young person deciding to make these statements. What I would say to protesting schoolchildren is this: “We need the climate engineers, the geo-physicists and the scientists of the future. Those are skills that you will learn best by engaging in education. You are protesting; we are listening. We have to work together and we need your skills to solve this problem.”

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The west midlands was the home of the industrial revolution. We sparked the carbon revolution; we would like to lead the zero-carbon revolution. However, it has been harder to decarbonise our power system since the Government phased out feed-in tariffs for solar. It is harder to decarbonise our transport system because of the confusion, identified by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee before Christmas, around electric vehicles.

It is harder to decarbonise energy in our homes when the Minister cannot tell me, in parliamentary answers, our share of the energy company obligation funding that might fund that retrofitting. Cities in this country would like to lead the green industrial revolution, so why does she not help them?

Claire Perry: I will certainly look at the last point. It may be that we just do not cut the data by metropolitan area. ECO is an important fund that we are using to focus on fuel poverty and create more innovation. I do not think there is confusion. The feed-in tariff scheme, which the right hon. Gentleman will know given his time in the Treasury, was an extremely expensive scheme. We have spent almost £6 billion so far and it will cost us £30 billion over the future of the scheme. Essentially, as I mentioned to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), we have seen the price of the renewable technologies we are supporting tumble. We do not have to subsidise to drive take-up. The smart export guarantee, which I will introduce soon, will pay people for that generation and ensure there is a demand-side aggregation created in the homes investing in it.

On transport, we have been very clear. We have one of the most ambitious programmes of moving to zero-carbon new vehicle sales. *[Interruption.]* It is true. Opposition Members should look at what other countries are doing. The right hon. Gentleman will know from his constituency that one in five of the electric vehicles sold in Europe is made in the UK. We do not just want to be leaders in how many are driving on our roads; we want to be leaders in investing in the technology that the world is moving towards.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that caring about climate change and the environment is not a monopoly of the left—far from it, as evidenced by the many actions of this Government—but that there is a political debate to be had? Does she agree that it is possible to reduce emissions and grow the economy and that this is particularly important not only for the UK but for many of the world's developing economies?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. There is too much fear and not enough hope. If we look at the UK, the low-carbon economic sector is growing four times faster than the mainstream economy and we have 400,000 people—bigger than the aerospace sector—employed in green jobs. We can continue to see the global opportunities from investment. This is a massive opportunity. Not only are we saving the world's ecosystems; we are creating jobs for the future. We know that 65% of those under 24 want what they call a green-collar job. They just do not know how many are out there.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): One way we can decarbonise homes is by using geothermal energy, particularly in former mining areas. The University of Durham has done a lot of research on this subject. Would the Minister like to come to learn about the research it is doing and consider how we can implement it?

Claire Perry: It would be a pleasure to come and visit. We have had several debates on geothermal heat, in

particular from old mine workings. It seems only fitting that the blood, sweat and tears of those thousands of men who dug up the energy source of our first industrial revolution could somehow be reused by using hot water as another source of energy.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments about listening to and acting on the science. If that is the case, the Committee on Climate Change has questioned whether support for oil and gas may become incompatible with the Government's long-term climate change objectives. In the spirit of not disappearing down a rabbit hole of conflict, perhaps we can agree, on both sides of the House, on whether there is a sustainable way to reduce fossil fuel extraction to move from maximum economic recovery to sustainable economic recovery.

Claire Perry: That is a very important point. The oil and gas industry, which employs hundreds of thousands of people, has contributed billions to our Exchequer and is extremely important to communities north of the border. It is one of our most productive industries. It is part of the transition, and the exciting thing is that technologies such as offshore wind, the sector deal for which I announced just recently, will be a brilliant industry for many of those employees to transition into. In fact, our world leadership in working in very difficult offshore conditions in oil and gas exploration is perfect for offshore wind, so there is a natural transition. Of course, these are important industries, which I believe also recognise the role that they have to play in the transition.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): A young woman from Boroughmuir High School in my constituency wrote to me ahead of the school climate strikes, calling for politicians to prioritise wind and tidal power over nuclear and fossil fuels. The Scottish Government are trying to do that, but until such time as we become independent, we require the UK Government's assistance. Can the Minister tell me when the Government will reverse their policy of prioritising new nuclear plants and putting the kybosh on tidal power in Scotland?

Claire Perry: I will not correct the hon. and learned Lady on too many things, but we have a mixed, diverse energy supply, which is decarbonising very rapidly. We have not put the kybosh on tidal. In fact, we invested the same amount in R&D funding for tidal as we did with any other technology; it is just that other renewables have out-competed it much more rapidly. However, I was pleased to meet the renewable energy council with cross-party support recently to see what more we can do to support that. I believe that nuclear has a part to play. It is part of our zero-carbon future. We have a nuclear sector deal and it is an incredibly productive industry for the United Kingdom.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome what the Minister had to say on our cleanest and greenest year for electricity yet and her approach to the Committee on Climate Change, but does she share some of my concerns about the goals of Extinction Rebellion? This is an organisation that has pledged to take non-violent direct action but whose co-founder was arrested on charges of criminal damage against a corporate headquarters.

[Richard Graham]

To what extent are the Government also looking at how we can mitigate the potentially violent actions of this movement?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is right to point out that we should be able to have a civilised, important and strong debate about our aims. It is challenging, though, to see that there are acts of violence or acts of criminal damage. I am also aware that no political party or campaigning organisation is endorsing one of the key asks of Extinction Rebellion, which is a net zero emissions target by 2025. It is simply not something that can be delivered. It is right to have that challenge, but we have to be able to take what we do best in this country, which is to have a civilised debate, and apply it to the most important issue of our time.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The Minister mentioned her international influence in relation to reducing carbon emissions. The USA is one of the biggest CO₂ polluters in the world. Can she ask the Prime Minister to use all her influence when President Trump comes to the UK to get the US to recommit to its obligations from the Paris summit and to set up a climate emergency in the USA to tackle global warming?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, but despite the rhetoric, the US's decarbonisation record is very good. In fact, it cut its carbon intensity by 3.7% for the year ending in 2017, which is well ahead of the global average and, indeed, well ahead of the EU's average. He will know that this is about not just federal actions, but the actions of states, cities and companies. The We Are Still In coalition, which is hugely accelerating work on decarbonisation action—for example, the net zero targets of the state of California—is delivering real change in the United States, and we should celebrate that.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, had the honour of meeting Greta Thunberg at the parliamentary leaders' roundtable discussions this morning. I would like to put on record my thanks to all the youth climate change activists who have succeeded in putting climate change at the top of the agenda.

Climate change waits for no Government. I travelled to London on the train with Heather Bolton from Gwynedd. She was on her way to attend the Extinction Rebellion protests in Westminster. We talked about Fairbourne on the Gwynedd coast where the whole community has been warned to prepare to move out within 40 years. Climate change is more than a passing inconvenience to the people of Fairbourne. Will the Minister accept my invitation to visit the community and see the economic, social and human cost of inaction?

Claire Perry: I am always delighted to visit installations in Wales—I visited Bridgend with the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and saw the amazing innovation work being led there—so it would be an absolute pleasure. The hon. Lady is right to point out that this is not just a challenge for a few. The Karman layer—the line where the earth's atmosphere merges into outer space and where all the gases on which life depends are found—is 60 miles deep. I would not get even halfway to her

constituency, if I was driving straight up, before I tipped out of the atmospheric layer. That is why this is such an important opportunity and we must work together.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): If you can believe it, Mr Speaker, it was not in the too-distant past that I was a young activist. What I hated then and what I know young people hate now is when politicians say the future is theirs, because the present is theirs and this planet is theirs. One of the four demands of the climate strikers is extending the vote to 16 and 17-year-olds. They are so passionate about this topic. Will the Minister agree to giving them the vote so that they can vote on it?

Claire Perry: I did not realise the demands had got that broad. The hon. Lady is right to focus on something really important: it is the job of Governments to steward what they have for a period of time and then pass it on in a better state to the next generation. Whether it is the earth's climate or the economy, that is what we exist to do. I do not know where the argument about the voting age sits in that. We have heard loud and clear what the next generation, and indeed grannies, grandpas, parents—all of us—need to do. We need to work together to accelerate our actions.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the young people in many countries across the world without whom we would not be here today having this debate. They have reminded us how urgent the climate crisis is and that we have to be very ambitious—a lot more ambitious than we have been so far. Are the Government committed to making our electricity grid 100% carbon zero before 2050? If so, when will we know about this new target?

Claire Perry: When I launched the offshore wind sector deal, I said that power generation would be at least 70% net carbon zero by 2030—in only 11 years—so we can extrapolate from that. There is a view among energy system modellers, however, that there will always need to be some level of thermal energy generation on the grid, because you cannot do a cold start based on current renewable and storage technology, which raises the question of how we further decarbonise our gas supply in particular.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Ratchaplacency in government is the reason young people have left their classrooms to educate politicians and to challenge us in this place. Rather than just warm words, in the light that we are going to miss our fourth and fifth carbon budgets, will the Minister commit to setting every public authority and local authority stringent carbon budgets?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is right to point out the role of local authorities. I believe that much policy is best pulled through at a local level, where it is possible to join up regeneration, transport systems, cycling and walking strategies and so on, rather than pushed out from Westminster. The young people of today—it is such a patronising phrase, isn't it? Everybody in the UK today should be proud of the fact that we listened and 10 years ago with cross-party support passed the world's first climate change Act. We listen in this place. We

might not act as quickly as people want, or in the ways people want, but we must look at our early movement and the fact that we have led the world in decarbonisation. We are listening and we are acting.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Dealing with the climate emergency will require us to ensure that billions of pounds are invested in low-carbon technologies. Most of that money will come from the private sector, and must be invested in heat and transport technologies in particular. The money is there, but for it to be invested at scale will require certainty.

Since 2010, zero-carbon homes have been needlessly scrapped by the coalition Government; now that is coming back. The energy company obligation solid-wall programme lasted less than a year after it was announced. Tidal lagoons have been flirted with, and have gone nowhere. The carbon capture fund money was put up and then taken away. Onshore wind was banned entirely. The Green Investment Bank was set up, and has already been sold off. That is fundamentally why green investment in the UK is falling. Where there has been certainty—mainly in offshore wind—progress has indeed been rapid. However, it is not just the protesters but those in the financial markets who are saying that while there has been some good progress, it is just not enough. Perhaps it is time for the Government to listen to one or both of those groups.

Claire Perry: Many of the projects that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned were being funded entirely by Government subsidies. The Government have no money of their own; the money that they have is other people's money. Someone has to pay—either the taxpayers and consumers who have already borne many of the policy costs, or private sector shareholders. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to refer to the importance of certainty, and policies that will stand the test of political time, such as those that we have set out now in the clean growth strategy, will secure that investment certainty. The good news is that the world is moving rapidly away from high-carbon investments, and investors are looking for opportunities that we are able to offer.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): We salute 16-year-old Greta Thunberg, the school climate strikers and Extinction Rebellion. They have shone a light on the issue of the issue of climate change in a way that it seems only David Attenborough is able to equal. Surely the Minister recognises that her Government must do more. Perhaps they could follow the lead of the SNP Scottish Government, with their world-leading climate change targets, and perhaps—as was suggested by the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley)—they could follow our example of allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote on these issues, because they are clearly well ahead of some of the dinosaurs in this place.

Claire Perry: I do not see too many dinosaurs in the building today. However, I pay tribute to both the devolved Administrations and the Westminster Government, who have worked incredibly well on these issues. We share one goal, we share one set of climate budgets, and we share one set of, largely, taxpayer receipts which have paid for much of this investment. We must continue to work together, and we must look

for points at which we can come together rather than looking for those at which we can diverge, which I am afraid the hon. Lady's party often wants to do.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Climate change is not a party political issue, but an issue of global importance. In the light of that, the Government's complacency today, and their refusal to take leadership at a national level, is extremely worrying.

I feel very emotional about this issue. I listened to Greta earlier, and I applaud her for pointing out the obvious, for inspiring us, and for reminding us how crucial it is that we take action now. This morning my granddaughter was born. Looking at her, I feel that we owe it to these children and young people—the Government owe it to them, and let me politely say to the Minister that she owes it to them—to demonstrate that we are doing more than talking about this. What actions will the Minister take to ensure that those young people have the future that they deserve?

Claire Perry: I congratulate the hon. Lady on becoming a granny. That does not seem possible.

Whatever I say, or other Ministers say, from the Dispatch Box is reported in *Hansard*, and is the next day's chip paper. What we must do is act. We must set out actions, set out our ambitions, and work together. I am disappointed to hear that the hon. Lady thinks I have been complacent at the Dispatch Box. I have tried incredibly hard to show that we are listening, we are acting, and we are delivering. We must accelerate that, but the hon. Lady should be proud of the fact that ours is the first developed country to say, "Help us to understand what net zero looks like: what will the changes have to be?" Does that sound hopeless? It sounds hopeful to me.

Chris Bryant: Despite living in an area of multiple deprivation, the vast majority of my constituents own their homes, but it is very difficult for them to make those homes viable and to conserve energy. The previous system, introduced by the coalition Government, was a complete and utter disaster: local businesses closed, and a great deal of shoddy work was done. Many families were desperate, because they thought that they had wasted money and were financially out of pocket themselves. Will the Government look closely at a new means of ensuring that people like my constituents can do their bit, although they have not much money in their own pockets?

Claire Perry: I am happy to tell the hon. Gentleman that the Each Home Counts review that we did, whose recommendations we have accepted, and where we have a trust mark for the work he mentions, should stop this problem happening in the future. Too much shoddy work has been done. Reparations have been made. Essentially, people have to have confidence that the work they are having done to their homes is of a high standard and is effective.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Tragically, Ella Kissi-Debrah lost her life to asthma, and the courts are currently looking at whether the authorities had any responsibility in that tragic death. I believe there is a crisis in children's respiratory health.

[Catherine West]

There is a meeting tonight with the title “Pollution Has No Borders”. One thing the Government could do would be to take away the cuts to local councils, which were looking at having more clean buses. Just increasing the number of bus journeys rather than car journeys would help not only lots of people on low incomes but the planet. Please could that be one thing that the Minister takes away from these questions and pledges to look into? Will she give that money back to councils so that action can be taken on our terribly polluted air?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is right to point out that one problem we do not talk about enough is that CO₂ pollution is often associated with particulate pollution, and one of the co-benefits of cutting emissions is that we get cleaner air. However, I gently say that she is wrong to focus on a reduction in budgets for zero-carbon transport. My recollection—I will check this and write to her—is that those budgets have gone up, and I myself have seen some of the hydrogen and hybrid buses that are running. Of course, the challenge is also to get more cars off the roads, because they obviously have a far greater level of pollutant per mile travelled, and to ensure that children, particularly in the most deprived areas, have clean air to breathe.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Extinction Rebellion is a vital movement. During the protests on Sunday, my five-year-old son Andrew and I found an amazing sense of positivity, peace and passion for change. Young people are leading the way, and we must listen to them. Does the Minister recognise that, for all the action that is being taken, it will not be enough on the current trajectory, and that we need a transformation in the level of our ambition if we are to secure our future?

Claire Perry: I do recognise that ambitions need to be raised not just here but around the world. That is why I hope we will have the chance to secure the crucial climate change talks next year, because we need to demonstrate that that is possible and not something to be frightened of. We need to work together with other countries to try to raise ambition collectively, and it will be wonderful to have cross-party support for the UK to be the host of those talks.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I think I could sum up the Minister’s response today as, “The rest of the world is rubbish. We are better. We are doing things ahead of everybody else. I can’t understand why people came here and demonstrated.” By definition, it was a peaceful demonstration, but over 1,000 people managed to defy the authorities to the point where they were arrested. These people are not going to go away. So, Minister, what has changed as a result of their protests over the last few days?

Claire Perry: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that I think that that is a really wrong reading of what I have said, and I am happy to send him *Hansard*—he will find that quite the opposite was said. What has changed is that everything has changed in a way, in that we now know how broad this protest is and the depth of people’s feelings. We are as frustrated as they are about some of the challenges, but we also have to recognise in this

place that whatever we do is fair to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, to my constituents and to those who pay for the changes. I must also mean that the world can come with us, and I want to keep emphasising that point. We must not be complacent—nobody is complacent—but we have shown that we can deliver, that we will deliver and that we know we need to do more. However, we will have to do that together.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): The Extinction Rebellion protest over the last few days has prevented business as usual, but that is nothing compared with what climate change will do, and is doing, in certain areas of the world. It is not good enough to talk the talk and not walk the walk. This issue needs a fundamental, transformative shift in our economy and in what we do. The Secretary of State is shutting her eyes and ears on this. Will she tell us today what action is actually being taken across Government to demonstrate that fundamental shift and to challenge business as usual?

Claire Perry: I thank the hon. Lady for my inadvertent promotion. She just has to look at the numbers: we have had the cleanest year for electricity generation that we have ever had, and this weekend this country, which was built on coal, went for the longest period ever without using any coal. We are legislating to ensure that homes will have no more fossil fuel heating, and 42,000 homes in my constituency are now off the gas grid. From 2025, no home will be able to be built there unless it has some other form of heating. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady shakes her head, but she knows better than many in this place, given her long involvement in these matters, that it is all very well for politicians to stand up and mouth empty platitudes but what we have to do is deliver actions, not words. That is what we are delivering.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): As the Minister knows, the Governor of the Bank of England warned last week that climate change poses a financial risk to investments such as people’s pension savings. In March, the \$1 trillion Norwegian sovereign wealth fund declared that it would no longer invest in oil and gas exploration, in order to minimise exposure to those climate-related financial risks. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that the green finance strategy includes incentives for people to invest and for organisations to provide investments that are sustainable?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of pension fund investing. When we had our Green Great Britain Week last year, we said that one of the most effective things that an individual could do was to their move pension fund if they were able to, or to lobby the trustees of their pension fund, like the House of Commons pension fund’s trustees, to move away from fossil fuel or unsustainable investment. The opportunities are there, and I am really proud of the work that the Bank of England has done on the climate risk disclosure, but clearly we need to do more. If the hon. Lady has ideas, we would be extremely keen to discuss them, because we would be much better off if we all put our heads together.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My city of Oxford is the first in the country to create a citizens’ assembly focused on the climate crisis. The Minister

said that she wanted a broad-based debate, but we all know what happens far too often: we have a politically expedient knee-jerk reaction to anything that goes against the status quo. So please will she come to Oxford, see what we are doing, and look genuinely at these cases so that we can have a much more broad-based discussion about the climate crisis and do something about it?

Claire Perry: Of course, and part of the reason that I am so passionate about this is that I studied climate change, geography and meteorology at Oxford University many years ago. Many of the people associated with the university have been world leaders in understanding the science, and Oxford City Council has done some amazing things in this space. Again, we are really keen to learn. I do not accept that there are knee-jerk political reactions. The clean growth strategy sets out what we will do over the next 25 years to meet our budgets, but if we have good ideas, let us stop hoarding them; let us share them.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): One of the sectors that has not done well on reducing carbon emissions is road transport. One of the policy levers that used to be available was the fuel duty escalator, which the coalition Government ceased to proceed with and which the current Government do not want to return to. Does the Minister agree that that matter needs to be looked at again and that, in terms of carbon emissions, those decisions were a mistake?

Claire Perry: I mentioned at the beginning that we have to do things that are proportionate and fair. I know that the hon. Gentleman supported the cap on fuel prices that we put in, because we had to ensure that it was not the least well-off who were paying for the transition. I pay tribute to his work and to his own personal cycling activities. As he knows, the city of Cambridge is an exemplar for cycling and for effectively ensuring that road transport becomes a thing of the past.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for supporting the message and for her actions. I was among the MPs who attended the meeting to listen to Greta Thunberg today. She is 16 years old and an inspirational young girl; she inspired me and many other Members as well. At 16 years of age, she is just six years older than my oldest grandchild Katie, 10 years older than my grandchild Mia and almost 16 years older than my grandchild Austin. What message would the Minister give to my three grandchildren and all other children that the climate action being taken today will have made a difference?

Claire Perry: By working together, we can solve the biggest challenge humanity has ever faced. It will be difficult, but it is doable. In doing so, we will create jobs and prosperity for the next generation.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The Minister will know that over half of the UK's planned carbon reduction is tied up in some way or another with EU regulations and that EU agencies are key to enforcement. Assuming that the Government's new office for environmental protection is ever established, will it have a climate change enforcement remit? If not, why not?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman will be able to discuss that matter further during the passage of the environment Bill. He makes a powerful point, but I reassure him, as I have said many times, that no part of our exiting the EU will compromise our climate ambition. Indeed, our progress to date is well ahead of the rest of the EU.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I extend my thanks to and express my admiration of Greta Thunberg, whose speech I had the honour of hearing today—her microphone was working, which I know was of concern to her at some points. Much needs to change, and we need to move forward together as a country to deliver that change sustainably. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), what substantial and specific plans does the Minister have for how we should formally engage with the public on how we respond, in policy and legislative terms, to our climate crisis? Why will she not consider a citizens' assembly?

Claire Perry: I have not ruled such an assembly in or out, and I am interested in how one would work. I am also interested in how the Youth Parliament could provide a steer for younger people coming to this place. The hon. Lady said that we have not had this conversation, but I was struck when I launched the first Green Great Britain Week last October that it marked the first time that we had had a national moment at which we could come together to talk about what we had achieved and then challenge ourselves to go further. There have been many campaigns, such as the Climate Coalition's brilliant #ShowTheLove campaign, but one of the exciting things—the hon. Lady asked me what we are doing that is different—is that this conversation has stopped being niche and started being mainstream. If the hon. Lady thinks that citizens' assemblies are the way to go and that we should be listening to them to get a stronger steer, let us have a conversation to see how that could work.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Minister overturn the ban on onshore wind?

Claire Perry: There is no ban on onshore wind, as the hon. Lady well knows. I was elected on a manifesto which said that large-scale wind development, of which there is now 13 gigawatts in the UK, rising to 14 gigawatts over the next year, is not appropriate for many parts of England. She will know from her constituency the benefits that offshore wind can deliver. We can put up 198 turbines, each as tall as the Gherkin, which offers incredible opportunities for the offshore servicing fleet in her constituency. We can regenerate the coastal communities that service such developments. We will continue to invest in onshore wind, but large-scale onshore developments are inappropriate for many parts of England.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Alongside a growing list of my Opposition colleagues—71 as of now—I have written to the Minister, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House calling on the Government to table at least a day's worth of debate in Government time to discuss their response to the Committee on Climate Change on how we will achieve net zero carbon emissions sooner rather than later. Will the Minister support that request today and join us in that debate?

Claire Perry: I will let the usual channels work out the timetable, but the hon. Gentleman knows that I will talk about such issues all day. In fact, I am due to make another statement in a short period of time, so we can do all this again.

Mr Speaker: And more. There is plenty of scope.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Minister is keen to trumpet the fact that the UK went 90 hours and 45 minutes without coal power, but the reality is that her Government are not making nearly enough of our potential in onshore and offshore wind, solar, wave and hydroelectric, particularly in pump-storage hydro. Scotland's efforts are being stymied by her Government's policies. What specific measures will she bring in to incentivise renewables across the UK?

Claire Perry: We are already incentivising renewables. We have always said—I believe that this is right—that we must be technologically neutral in such things. All technologies started out from pretty much the same place, but some have progressed faster than others. We must also have cost-effectiveness, so we cannot spend other people's money on supporting technologies that will remain expensive over the long term—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady is waving her hands, but is it not incredible that the price of offshore wind has dropped over the past two years by a proportion befitting a technology company, let alone a mechanical engineering company, because of the policy and auction structure and the market investment that we have brought forward? We should be celebrating that and the fact that the North sea is the best place in the world for offshore wind.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Global Witness published a report this morning that found that \$4.9 trillion is invested in oilfields and gasfields that are either in development or not yet in production and will therefore contribute to exceeding a global warming scenario of 1.5°, as per the terms of the Paris accord. Much of that investment comes from FTSE 100-registered companies. What legal advice will the Government be giving to London headquartered businesses that are investing in breach of our international obligations?

Claire Perry: I am sure the hon. Lady has also read "The Burning Question", which was published in 2013

and addresses the challenge of the valuation of oil and gas reserves. Indeed, I have already answered a question on this subject. There is a challenge on how quickly the oil and gas companies are transitioning but, as we were discussing earlier, many people in the UK, including the Exchequer, rely on this industry, which has allowed us to cross-subsidise much of the renewables success we have delivered. She also knows that these companies are global organisations, and we need to work globally to ensure we solve the problem.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister talks about action not words, and she also talks about the clean growth strategy. What does she think of the plans to downgrade the electrification of rail lines and, as the Secretary of State for Transport has done, to invest in and promote bimodal trains, which obviously are diesel for part of the time?

Claire Perry: I am having a flashback to my old job as rail Minister. The hon. Lady's constituency is a beneficiary of some of the big investments we are making, such as in the wind turbine factories located up there. We always need to balance cost, carbon and competitive advantage, and it was the case that we could deliver those benefits to passengers with those bimodal trains, which obviously have much lower CO₂ emissions than if they were full diesel, and I am sure her constituents welcome that investment.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The point of declaring a carbon emergency is to take action immediately, not in 2025 or 2030, so why are we not changing the planning rules so that all homes have to be carbon neutral now? Why are we not ensuring that all new buses on our streets are non-carbon emitting? These things are possible.

A thousand people have been arrested on the street in order to raise this issue in the House and in the country. Does the Minister agree that it is not in the public interest to prosecute those people? They should be getting awards, not prosecutions.

Claire Perry: I thought there might be a bit of Mace-waving coming on with that passionate speech. I will leave the question to my hon. Friends in the Ministry of Justice.

South-Eastern Rail Franchise

5.3 pm

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on his decision to delay, yet again, the award of the south-eastern rail franchise.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): In June 2017, the Department for Transport announced that the shortlisted bidders for the south-eastern franchise competition were: South Eastern Holdings Ltd; London and South East Passenger Rail Services Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Govia and the current incumbent; and Stagecoach South Eastern Trains Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Stagecoach Group plc.

Subsequently, in December 2018, the Department exercised an extension with the existing south-eastern operator, London and South Eastern Railway, until 23 June 2019 to allow further time for the competition to identify the next operator for the franchise. The Department is now in the process of negotiating a further direct award which, subject to a successful negotiation, will run until 10 November 2019, with an option to extend the agreement until April 2020. We are taking these steps to ensure continuity of services for passengers. This additional time is necessary to deliver the best possible outcome for passengers and taxpayers alike. We will update the House in the usual way as soon as this work is concluded.

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to the rail Minister, but he has not quite explained why such a mess has been made of this franchise. Can he confirm exactly when my constituents, who already pay the second-highest fares in the home counties, will get the long-promised new carriages? Can he explain why, if the franchising system is now under review, he has been able to award an eight-year franchise for the east midlands? Finally, can he explain why the compensation in respect of last year's timetable chaos is not going to the two stations most affected in my constituency, Shoreham and Eynsford, when the two operators enjoy common ownership? Is it not time to restore confidence in the whole franchising system?

Andrew Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for those questions. He has been a strong and tenacious champion for rail passengers in his constituency, raising issues with me and speaking in Westminster Hall debates. I share his impatience to get the benefits that are emerging from our franchises to his, and indeed to all, constituents. This is a huge and complex piece of public procurement, and it is right to take the time to make sure we get it right and to finalise this competition. The area is one of the most complex on our network; it has a mix of high-speed and commuter services, with a highly intensive use of infrastructure. I cannot tell him the date on which we will be able to make the announcement. This is a live competition involving market-sensitive information. There is an established method of communication to the House and the markets, so I cannot answer him and am able to say little on that point today.

I can confirm to my right hon. Friend why the east midlands franchise was awarded, with the rail review taking place. That was simply because it was considered

that with the east midlands franchise award and this one we could get the benefits to passengers before the work of the rail review came into play. On compensation in respect of the two stations he mentioned, I will look at that carefully. On the point about the compensation following the May 2018 timetable changes, there were some significant problems, but they were not everywhere. The issue was to get the compensation to those who had been most affected. They received compensation that I think was appropriate, but I will check out those two stations and write to him as quickly as possible.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): So here we are again: a Transport Minister forced to the Dispatch Box to defend the actions—or, in this case, the lack of action—of the ever-failing Secretary of State. Following four delays on the south-eastern franchise, we now know that the Government are planning a direct award. After 12 other direct awards, including on south-eastern, is this approach being taken to avoid the embarrassment of failure further down the road? Two monopolies, Govia and Abellio, are left in the competition to run Britain's most beleaguered franchise. Following a litany of failures under Govia, highlighted in Chris Gibb's report two years ago, and a lacklustre response by the Secretary of State, who, frankly, should have brought the franchise under direct operation, the travelling public are being failed.

What discussions has the Minister had with the trade unions, as the hard-working staff face further uncertainty, not least over their jobs and pensions? Will he also confirm that there is no intention to cut pensions to staff through this franchise process? Are the Government going to stall on all franchises until the conclusion of the Williams review, which is undertaking a comprehensive look at why our rail system is floundering? If so, when will this report be published? In the light of revelations this weekend that sensitive confidential information was leaked from Stagecoach into the hands of Abellio during the east midlands process, what changes has the Minister made in his Department to ensure that commercially confidential information is not shared with competitors in this broken process? How are the Government measuring past failure of these rail monopolies? In the light of evidence, will he then rule out their bidding, as he has for other companies involved in other franchises?

With 176 million journeys being made each year, how can these passengers have any confidence that they will not pay the price for failure—something they have had to endure under the current award? They are paying some of the highest fares in exchange for one of the worst services, so it is clear that this franchising fiasco must end. If the Secretary of State will not take back control of our rail, Labour will.

Andrew Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. We are negotiating a short direct award to allow the competition to reach its end. This is not the end of franchising, which has been a significant ingredient in improving and turning around rail performance in this country. It has led to our having more services and passengers and at a greater level of safety than at any point in our country's history. Franchising has been part of that success. This is an issue not of failure but of making sure that we get it correct.

[Andrew Jones]

Have I discussed the franchise bid with the trade unions? No, because the bids are assessed by officers of the Department for Transport, who anonymise them. It is important, market-sensitive information. Such information runs through a standard procedure, of which the hon. Lady should be aware; it operates in councils, in the Government and in devolved Assemblies, too. I have of course met the trade unions, and I was able to confirm with them that my aspirations for the rail industry include the careers of those who serve the industry. The Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), asked about the same point in an urgent question just before the Easter recess. I do not want to see any cut to pensions; I want to see those who work on our rail services retire with secure and stable pensions. Nevertheless, we are talking about pensions from a private business, not something that comes from the Government.

The work on the Williams review is under way. I am sure the hon. Lady will have seen some of the evidence papers and heard about the emerging thinking that Mr Williams has discussed in some of the speeches he has made over the past few weeks. We look forward to seeing the output of that review. Franchising has been an ingredient in the turnaround of our rail industry that has been so fantastic for this country. The question now is how we take that to the next stage, which is what the Williams review is all about.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): My constituents are as anxious as anyone about the reasons that lie behind this continuing delay, but they are even more anxious that the improvements we have all been promised under the new franchise do actually happen. Will my hon. Friend assure me and my constituents that the improvements, particularly the extra capacity on the high-speed line, will be available when the franchise is eventually awarded?

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend asks about how the bid may finally be judged. I cannot comment on the work in progress, but I can say that an invitation to tender was published in November 2017. It was the result of a significant consultation, to which there were 10,000 or so responses. I am as anxious as my right hon. Friend to get the benefits of that invitation to tender out to the constituents whom he serves so well, and as fast as possible, but I cannot give an answer today on who will win the franchise. That work is carried out separately by officials, away from Ministers, and the information is anonymised because it is so important and market sensitive, but his point will have been heard by all those in the industry.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The south-eastern franchise was originally due to end in 2014. The failure of the west coast franchise delayed that ending until August 2018, and now the direct award to Govia could be further extended. It is hard to understand why, if the Government still believe in competition for rail services, the Department for Transport seems absolutely unable to run a competition for this franchise. Will the Minister clarify how many compliant bids were received for the south-eastern franchise and how many were received for the east midlands franchise that was awarded two weeks ago?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Lady makes the point about whether franchising is dead; no, it is not, because of course we managed to award a franchise only in the week before Easter recess. As a process, then, franchising is working. Can we get the benefits out to passengers as fast as possible? That is of course what it is all about, but these are complex questions and it is appropriate that we take our time to get it right. On the number of compliant bids, the issue of pensions obviously attracted a lot of attention in respect of the east midlands bid. We have two pension-compliant bids for the south-eastern franchise and look forward to making the announcement as soon as we possibly can.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): Will my hon. Friend assure me that this further delay to the award of the franchise will not hold up long-awaited works for Petts Wood and St Mary Cray stations to become fully accessible—something for which residents have been campaigning for many years?

Andrew Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I share his enthusiasm for the access-for-all process and the recent announcement of extra funds and where those funds will be targeted by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani). I can tell him that design work on the stations selected will be starting over the summer, with construction as soon as possible thereafter. I know that he is anxious for the benefits to serve his constituents. So am I and so is the Under-Secretary of State, who I know is listening. She has indicated that she would be very happy to meet him to take the matter forward.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): Further to his letter of 10 April in which the Under-Secretary of State assured Members that robust scrutiny would be used in this decision-making process, can he please reassure my beleaguered constituents in east Kent that that scrutiny will also apply to the exorbitant fare rises, constant delays and disruptions, arbitrary timetable changes and removal of services?

Andrew Jones: I can most certainly provide the hon. Lady's constituents with the assurance that she is seeking. We will obviously be focusing on fares. We want to make sure that the travelling public get a great deal, which is why we have frozen regulated fares in line with inflation for the sixth year in a row. It is also why, in January, we saw the launch of the 16 to 18-year-old railcard, which will come into play later this year. So will there be attention on costs and scrutiny of fares? Of course there will. We will be maintaining that. This policy, which has delivered its sixth year, against Labour's intentions, will be continued.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Will the Minister please confirm that the City Thameslink service from Maidstone East will still be delivered before the end of the year? It is desperately needed and it has been promised on a multitude of occasions.

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend has been a very diligent campaigner on this issue. I know that it matters a lot to her and to her constituency. She has been a real vocal champion on this issue specifically. However, this is also an industry-led process and we are working with it to

deliver the benefits as soon as possible. I cannot comment immediately on that matter because it is not part of this franchise but, of course, I will check the information and keep her posted on progress.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If the rail review recommends that suburban services in the London area be transferred to London government, will the Government allow south-eastern suburban services to be transferred in that way to maximise integration of transport services in London?

Andrew Jones: That is a very interesting question. I would expect the rail review to make some interesting recommendations about devolution. I am personally a fan of devolution, but we had better see what it says before commenting on the outcome.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I note my hon. Friend's statement today on the south-eastern rail franchise. I am, of course, bitterly disappointed that we have not made any progress on this matter. In the meantime, my constituents continue to suffer a poor service into London. It is also disappointing, but rather ironic, that, just like the rail service, all we seem to see from his Department is continual delay. As he is well aware, improvements are desperately needed to our service in the borough of Bexley—and not later this year, next year or sometimes never. Our constituents are paying more money for a poor service. What we are expecting is a decision so that we can look to a better future and the travelling public from Bexley have a better service. At the moment, they do not.

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. He is a diligent campaigner on rail issues for his constituency. We saw that at an important level when there was the landslip earlier this year. He was a great champion in making sure that the voices of his travelling constituents were heard in this House. I cannot yet tell him when we will be making the announcement on the decision on who wins the south-eastern franchise competition, but I can tell him that I am extremely keen to get the benefits that the franchise will bring to his constituents. I will make sure that he is kept fully posted on progress.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): There appears to be a serious issue around rail pensions. The Minister has said that there are two pension-compliant bids on the table. Could he tell me whether the Department has made any changes to the franchise specifications in respect of pension obligations, and what conversations have been held with the Pensions Regulator regarding the deficit?

Andrew Jones: The Pensions Regulator is an independent body and the pensions that we are talking about are those of private companies, so the role for the Government is not a direct one. Operators are currently liable for the full pensions risk during their franchise term. These competitions—including the east midlands competition, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood)—included a risk-sharing mechanism with the Government that actually reduced the risk to which operators are exposed. Under this mechanism, the operators retain risks that they are able

to manage. There have been some changes, but they are about risk-sharing for the future; so there was a notable change in the franchises.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is disappointing that, like so many Southeastern trains, the south-eastern franchise is itself delayed. My constituents expect the new franchise to give them improved services, to reduce overcrowding, and to introduce Delay Repay 15, smart ticketing and flexible season tickets, which are all really important. Will my hon. Friend ensure that, although the franchise is delayed, these improvements will not be? Could they be introduced in advance of the new franchise, rather than our having to wait for so long?

Andrew Jones: I will have a look at my hon. Friend's point. The key benefits that have come into our rail services over the past few years have come in through the franchising process, as it has brought in private investment. That investment has purchased or leased new rolling stock, which has meant a transformation across the country for the travelling public. My hon. Friend is as impatient as I am that the benefits that we are seeing come to fruition for her constituents, and I will of course work to deliver them as fast as possible.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The franchise specification promised extra capacity, new rolling stock, greater frequency of trains and 15-minute Delay Repay, but my constituents will now not see those improvements for at least another seven—perhaps 12—months. What specifically is the Department going to do to improve services for passengers on Southeastern throughout the period of the franchise extension?

Andrew Jones: We are working to bring the franchise decision to a conclusion as fast as possible, and to get the benefits that will come with that decision right across the franchise as quickly as we can.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The delay to this franchise is not only a delay to the people of Tonbridge and West Malling, and to the towns and villages around the area; it is also a delay to a strategy that the Minister already announced—the 15-minute delay compensation. I do hope that his initial statement that this scheme will wait until a change of franchise will no longer apply, and that he will instead introduce the change from a 30-minute to a 15-minute delay compensation now. If we are to wait still further, it will cost commuters in the wonderful towns that I have the privilege to represent, as they will have to pay more for delayed services.

Andrew Jones: Delay Repay 15—a compensation system that will give any passenger who has been delayed by 15 minutes or more 25% of their fare back—will be a part of all future franchise awards. We have recently been able to make some in-franchise changes in other areas, such as on Northern and Great Western. I will look into my hon. Friend's point. I am aware of how well this scheme has been received where we have been able to make the changes. It is not quite as straightforward as saying that we can do this immediately, but I know that he is hungry for that benefit and I will do what I can to help him achieve it.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I do not quite understand how the Minister can anonymise the two bids when there are only two bidders, one of which is the existing franchise. Setting that aside, this franchise is fraying at the edges. There have been yet more delays this afternoon because of a broken down train. Is it not time that the Department for Transport spoke to the Mayor of London about London's suburban services and sorted out this mess once and for all?

Andrew Jones: The process for the assessment and award of bids is handled away from Ministers and by the content of the bid rather than by the bidder's name, so these things are handled in a way that is perhaps a little different from that which the hon. Gentleman suggests. I have had a conversation with the Mayor, but not on this issue. He came to the Department for Transport seeking a loan facility of over £2 billion to help with the completion of Crossrail. We were able to help with that. It is of course a loan that will need to be repaid, but the loan has been made and he is, I believe, drawing down on it. He needs to answer some questions about the long-term viability of Transport for London's finances.

On the performance on the network, of course there is more to be done on every single franchise. I want to make sure that we have services that are on time, every time. Ninety per cent. of trains on this franchise have been on time over the past few months. When I looked at the performance figures earlier today, I saw that it was 97%. But of course nobody wants to have any delays, and that is why this is my top priority.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Rail users and constituents of mine on the Maidstone East line and the Medway Valley line from Chatham are fed up with being forced to pay through the nose to use a service beset by delays, lack of information and poor-quality rolling stock. Continuous delays in deciding the next franchise provide no incentive for the current franchise holder to make any investment to improve services for those users. What can the Minister do to ensure that passengers receive the service that they pay for now rather than in the future—for which, like Southeastern's, the timetable keeps changing?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend has been a champion for her travelling public. I know that because she has made this point to me on a number of occasions, both in this House and in meetings outside. On the management of the franchise, there is, as with all franchises, a performance regime that is operated through the Department for Transport. Whenever we see franchises failing in any way, we take action right away. I say what I have said to other colleagues across the House: I am impatient to see the benefits of this franchise award out there as soon as possible. Consequently, I will be making sure that we get this decision made as fast as we possibly can, and I will keep her informed of progress.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): This is the fourth time that the award of a new franchise has been delayed. Commuters from my constituency and from others across the south-east have been facing delays, cancellations, and overcrowding on trains. The continued delay is preventing long-term investment and improvements, placing millions of passengers at a disadvantage. Will the

Minister therefore provide an update on the timeline for the award, be transparent about the reasons for the repeated delay, and outline a long-term view on the viability of the franchise system as a whole?

Andrew Jones: My view on the franchise system as a whole is that it has been a part of our improvement in our rail performance as measured by the number of services, the number of passengers, and the quality of journeys over the past few years. The benefits of a privately run industry have been profound. I cannot answer the hon. Lady's question because this is market-sensitive information. There is information that will need to be announced to the markets and to the House in the normal manner when the decisions are made.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I happen to agree with my hon. Friend the Minister about the benefits that come from franchising. Having said that, perhaps he will take this point in the spirit in which I make it when I say that if one was paying someone to discredit the franchising process, the way his Department has gone about it could not be bettered—it is an utter shambles. In order not to add insult to injury to my long-suffering constituents, will he return to the very fair point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat)—that the very least the Department can do is to ensure that if the company seeks an extension to the current franchise and continues to get financial benefit, it shall be obliged to bring in 15-minute Delay Repay straight away, and not wait?

Andrew Jones: The issue for me is how to ensure that the trains are run on time every time, but when things go wrong we need a compensation scheme that is fair to the traveling public. I share my hon. Friend's impatience to get the benefits that will come from this franchise award to the constituents he serves so well. I will keep him updated on progress, including on DR15.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): As the Minister knows, the contract for the rolling stock for the London underground deep tube was awarded to a company that intends to build the majority of the rolling stock in Austria, having promised that it would be built in the UK. What guarantees can he give that the company awarded the new south-eastern rolling stock contract will build the trains in the UK and provide work for train companies such as Hitachi in Newton Aycliffe in my constituency?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman is a great champion for that rail company in his constituency. He has told me about it on a number of occasions, and I hope to visit the plant shortly. I have met the company, and I am aware of the quality of its product. I cannot direct where a private company places an order. We are in an open market economy—we have competition, which delivers passenger benefits, value and passenger experiences that were never possible when this railway was nationalised. I am sure that those who are making the purchasing decisions will be aware of the point he makes and of the merits of British manufacturing.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): These delays are regrettable, but they at least give the Minister an opportunity to look again at the terms of the franchise. I was pleased

when the Oyster card system was extended to Dartford, to cater for my constituents. Does he agree that any new franchise contract should include a term to ensure that smart ticketing is extended beyond the current boundaries?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a wise point, as ever. Smart ticketing is a part of the rail future right across the country, not just in Dartford. The pay-as-you-go extension has been very popular across the south-east. The benefits of smart ticketing are profound, including convenience for passengers and the ability to change tickets more easily, and we are trying to ensure that they are part of all franchises.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister has referred to the Williams review several times. Keith Williams has already warned about the Government “micromanaging” the rail industry and driving passengers away. He has also said that the current franchise system is damaging to innovation. Does the Minister agree with those comments?

Andrew Jones: There are points in the current operation of the franchise system that can be improved, but micromanaging from Government is not helpful. The Labour position is to micromanage everything from Government by nationalising the railways, so there is—[*Interruption.*] There is a little bit of inconsistency in what the hon. Lady says.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My constituents will be disappointed with this delay, but I have every faith that the Minister will get this right. The Transport Committee has looked at the franchising process in a number of reports. It is very complex and detailed, and as a result it can be expensive and litigious. Will there be an opportunity to simplify the franchising process, so that we do not experience such delays when making decisions?

Andrew Jones: I hope that simplification of the structure of the industry, including the franchising process, will be one output of the Williams review.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. I went outside into Parliament Square to speak to members of Extinction Rebellion who wanted to exercise their right to come into Parliament to lobby their MP. I am holding over 100 letters to MPs. What guidance can you give those people who are unable today to exercise their right?

Mr Speaker: I have been attending to my duties in the Chair, so I cannot comment on what restrictions on access to or egress from the estate have applied, either as a matter of policy or on account on the very large number of people who may be around. In so far as the hon. Lady is seeking to give voice to the concerns of her constituents and others who are campaigning on this subject, she has found her own salvation, because she has made the point, she has held up the letters and it will be on the record in the *Official Report*, and I think therefore honour is served.

Sri Lanka

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, in respectful memory of the 321 people slaughtered in the appalling Easter Sunday terrorist attack in Sri Lanka, including eight British citizens, and of the approximately 500 people wounded in those attacks, I propose that we now hold a one-minute silence.

5.35 pm

The House observed a minute's silence.

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, thank you.

5.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Today, the flags in Downing Street and on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are flying at half-mast following the horrific Easter day terrorist attack in Sri Lanka. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the attack and the UK Government's response.

On Sunday, multiple terrorist suicide bombings were conducted across Sri Lanka. Six explosions occurred simultaneously—three in churches conducting Easter day services in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa, and three more in hotels in Colombo popular with foreign visitors. Information is still coming in, but we know that over 300 people have been killed, and we know that at least eight of those, sadly, are British nationals. They include mother Anita Nicholson with her 14-year-old son Alex and 11-year-old daughter Annabel, teenage brother and sister Amelie and Daniel Linsey, and retired firefighter Bill Harrop with his wife, retired GP Sally Bradley. The whole House will want to pass on our deepest sympathies and condolences, as we digest a truly heartbreaking situation.

I spoke to James Dauris, the British high commissioner in Colombo, earlier this afternoon, and I want to put on record my thanks to him, his team and all the employees of the British Council for their dedication in extremely testing circumstances. One locally employed British Council employee is in hospital with his wife, both with serious injuries, and our thoughts are also with them and their family. Our travel advice has been updated and remains the best source of information for any British nationals or family members who have concerns about the situation.

Yesterday, I spoke to my counterpart, the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, to express my thanks for the work of the emergency services in Sri Lanka, as well as to pass on our condolences to all the bereaved families. I also discussed what further support the UK might be able to offer. Her Majesty the Queen, the Prince of Wales and other members of the royal family have sent messages of condolence to the President and people of Sri Lanka, and the Prime Minister is expected to speak with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Wickremesinghe later today.

These attacks were a primitive and vile attempt to sow division between people of different faiths. Religious tensions have caused some of the bloodiest battles in human history, and it is sombre and sobering that even in the 21st century attempts continue to set believers of different religions against each other. Our response must be to deny the perpetrators the satisfaction of dividing us by being united in our condemnation of the attacks and united in our support for religious tolerance—

[Mr Jeremy Hunt]

surely one of humanity's greatest achievements. Just as after the equally horrific attacks on the two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, we must respond by bringing people together; that is the exact opposite of what the perpetrators intended.

It has to be said that the sheer brutality of the attacks was stark. One pair of attackers, after detonating their first explosives in a hotel, waited for people to try to escape before detonating a second device. The device destroyed by security services at Colombo airport was most likely designed to target fleeing civilians. The attack was complex, tightly co-ordinated and designed to cause maximum chaos, damage and heartbreak.

The UK will never stand by in the face of such evil. Today, we stand in solidarity with the Government and people of Sri Lanka, who have made enormous strides towards stability and peace following the conclusion of the civil war almost exactly 10 years ago. The Metropolitan police counter-terrorism command has dispatched a team of specialists to Sri Lanka, including family liaison officers, to support the families of British victims and assist with the repatriation of deceased British nationals. A recent programme run by Interpol involved the training of 30 Sri Lankan forensic specialists and police officers by UK experts in disaster victim identification. We hope that that will be of additional support.

The Government of Sri Lanka have declared a state of emergency as the investigation continues. More than 20 arrests have been made, and there are likely to be more people who were involved in the planning of this attack still at large. A large amount of improvised explosive device material has been recovered, including 87 low-explosive detonators that were recovered from a bus station. There are no verified claims of responsibility as yet. So far, 40 arrests have been made, and counter-terrorism activity continues. The Sri Lankan Prime Minister and President have both said publicly that there will be a thorough investigation into the incident and whether information was handled correctly, and it is important to let that process follow its course.

To attack Christian worshippers at Easter, which is a celebration of peace and the holiest day in the Christian calendar, betrays in the attackers an absence of the most basic values of humanity. Just two days ago, the Prime Minister and I both noted in our Easter messages the dangers facing Christians around the world, 300 of whom are killed every month. In response to such acts, we must redouble our efforts to protect the freedom of religious minorities to practise their faiths, wherever they are. For that reason, the FCO has asked the Bishop of Truro to do an independent report into what more can be done to protect persecuted Christians around the world.

The British Government will continue to give their wholehearted support to the people of Sri Lanka, and I am sure the House will join me in once again expressing our deepest sadness and sympathy to everyone who has been affected by these monstrous attacks. I commend this statement to the House.

5.43 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement and for the tone of his words, with which

I wholeheartedly agree. I join him in commending the work of the British high commission in Colombo. Once again, it has demonstrated that in the very worst of circumstances for British nationals abroad, our consular services offer the very best of support. I am sure the high commission will continue to ensure that the families of the British nationals who have so tragically been killed in the attacks get all the support they need at this time of unbearable shock and sadness.

I have full confidence in what the Foreign Secretary has said about the assistance that the Government are ready to offer to the Sri Lankan authorities, whether in relation to security and intelligence, or in relation to help for the forensic services. He has our support and our thanks for that.

I know that there are many questions to be asked about who was responsible for the attacks and what could have been done to prevent them, but today is not a time for those questions. On this day of national mourning in Sri Lanka, as the first of those who were killed are buried and as the death toll continues to mount, it is simply a time for this House and this country to stand with the people of Sri Lanka, with the British families and with those from around the world who have lost loved ones and to express our shared solidarity and grief at the devastation that they have suffered. It is a time to stand in admiration at the way in which the Sri Lankan people and their Government have responded to this attempt to divide them by instead coming together in peace and calling for the unity of all communities. We in the west must do our part to help Sri Lanka to recover from this horror by continuing to visit that beautiful country and showing the terrorists they will not win.

It is sadly apt that on St George's day, when we mark both the birth and the death of Shakespeare, we are confronted with the latest example of what he once called "mountainish inhumanity". That is the unspeakable inhumanity and evil of men who would walk into a group of peaceful Christian worshippers at prayer or happy foreign tourists having breakfast and blow these innocent people up, killing at least 320 people, including 45 children and an eight-year-old cousin of our good friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). Dozens are still fighting for their lives in hospital and hundreds more have received life-changing injuries.

When we ask how anyone's mind could become so warped and depraved as to commit such an act, just as we did about the attack on Muslims in Christchurch last month and on Jews in Pittsburgh last October, we must not make the mistake of blaming religion. There is no religion on this earth that teaches that the way to salvation is blowing up innocent children or shooting people at prayer. We must also not make the mistake of saying that one act of evil begets another, that somehow this atrocity happened because of the atrocity in Christchurch. I believe that that is an entirely false narrative, one that excuses terrorism. We should never indulge it. Instead, we should call it out for what it is: an act born of pure, vicious mind-polluting hatred perpetuated by sickening, despicable individuals who do not worship God but death; whose only religion is hate and whose fellow believers in hatred and in death must be wiped from the face of our earth.

But in these dark and terrible moments, I see one shred of light and one piece of definite proof that the narrative that says that evil begets evil and we reap what

we sow is indeed a false one. That was the deeply moving statement made by Ben Nicholson, confirming the loss of his wife and two children in the blast at the Shangri-La hotel. I do not think there is any one of us who could understand what that grief would feel like. We would all have understood if Mr Nicholson's reaction had been one of anger and hatred towards the people who had destroyed his family, but instead his response was filled with love for his wife and for his beautiful children. He rejected hatred, the hatred that had killed his family, and he responded to it with mountainish humanity: a humanity that no act of evil could corrupt, because, as Shakespeare also wrote:

"unkindness may defeat my life, But never taint my love."

Mr Hunt: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary not just for the tone of her comments but for the very moving way in which she delivered them. I thank her for her support of the work of the British high commission, which is particularly challenging at this time. We are indeed giving help to the Sri Lankan Government in the two areas on which they particularly requested help: counter-terrorism work and countering violent extremism, of which we sadly have a lot of experience in this country.

The right hon. Lady is right to say that at times like this bringing people together with a message of unity and reconciliation is the only approach. I think people on all sides of the House were immensely inspired by the tone taken by the New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, after the horrific attacks in Christchurch. I know the Sri Lankan Government are making every attempt to take the same approach.

I thank the right hon. Lady for talking about the extraordinarily generous response made by Ben Nicholson after losing his wife and two children. I also agree with her that these kinds of attacks, far from being religious, are condemned by people of all faiths and none for their utter depravity.

The final point I want to make is simply that while it is right that, in this House, we think about the eight British people who lost their lives, the vast majority of people who were murdered were Sri Lankans at church on Easter morning, celebrating the resurrection of Christ and life. They did not deserve to suffer this way and it is absolutely right that we remember them as well.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his statement and for raising the reality, which is clear to us all, that these attacks were planned to have the maximum effect on the single biggest day in a Christian calendar, when children are encouraged to be in the church, celebrating what has been the resurrection for Christians of Christ. Therefore, they would have known that the maximum effect would be devastating. Following what the Opposition spokesman, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said, does my right hon. Friend agree that the reality is that the one thing that Easter teaches us is that it is about sacrifice for others and the forgiveness that follows? I wonder whether he will therefore ensure that no matter what else happens, we give our greatest support to the Sri Lankan Government in pursuing those who conducted this terrible attack but, at the same time, recognising that the Christian faith is about forgiveness.

Mr Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for saying those brave words. It is very difficult for many people to think about forgiveness after what happened, but that is indeed an appropriate thing for Christians to think about, particularly at Easter. But forgiveness does not mean the absence of justice, and that is why it is absolutely essential that we support the Sri Lankan authorities in their determination to track down everyone responsible. We know that they have identified other people who have not yet been arrested, who they are looking for at the moment. Obviously, for the safety and security of everyone in Sri Lanka, it is vital that they are found, but I thank him for the generosity of his comments.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and join him in thanking the high commissioner, everybody at the high commission in Colombo and the rest of the Foreign Office officials, who must have worked in the most difficult and distressing circumstances over the weekend. I extend our thanks to the Sri Lankan emergency services as well for their efforts and work. At this time, our thoughts are obviously with all those who are affected, and we send our condolences to the families who have had their loved ones taken away in the cruellest of circumstances. That loss of life is always sad, but I have to say, I find it particularly heartbreaking how many children were killed in this attack, and the brave and touching statement from Mr Nicholson is a lesson for each and every one of us.

Savage acts of terrorism do not discriminate by age, but they do not discriminate by faith either. These attempts to sow division through violence at Easter, of all times, should be met with a response of peace and solidarity. Our message is that barbarism strengthens our belief in our common humanity, regardless of faith, background or ethnicity. I thank the Foreign Secretary for the work that is ongoing with the Sri Lankan authorities. I am glad that that assistance will be ongoing, but at the moment, our prayers and thoughts are with all those affected. The message from this place has to be that hate and violence will not win out.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, with which I wholeheartedly agree. The number of child victims, of many, many nationalities, is one of the most heartbreaking things to have occurred. What this event also reminds us is that when we talk about Christians suffering around the world, we are talking not about wealthy westerners, but about some of the poorest people in the world—it is only 8% of the population in Sri Lanka—and sometimes that fact has been obscured in terms of the priorities that we set ourselves as a country. That is what we are hoping to put right with the review that is being done by the Bishop of Truro.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary and the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) for the tone of their statements today. Through the Foreign Secretary and from experience, I express my thanks to Foreign Office and other UK Government personnel who will be involved in dealing with the aftermath of the incident. I thank the Foreign Secretary particularly for expressing so clearly the indiscriminate nature of terrorist violence. Does he agree that the best way to

[*Alistair Burt*]

protect the Christian community, or any community in the future, is to ensure that the rule of law is everywhere, that the best of intelligence is shared around the world, and that the understanding that an attack on one is an attack on all becomes universal, for there is no hierarchy in terms of victimhood?

Mr Hunt: Those are the kind of wise words that I would expect from my right hon. Friend, with whom I was privileged to work; he spent many years in the FCO. He is right to say that if we are going to prevent this kind of horrific massacre from happening in future, it is really a combination of the hard and the soft. The hard side, of course, is making sure that the security is there and that the security services are able to do their job to track down perpetrators and potential perpetrators. The soft side is what he and the shadow Foreign Secretary so movingly talked about, which is the message of reconciliation, because trying to set faith against faith is one of the oldest tricks in the book in human history. It is a great measure of human progress that in the last 100 years, we have massively increased across the world the amount of religious tolerance, but I am afraid that these events show that we can never be complacent.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his words, his statement and for all that his Department is doing, and I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her moving words. This was a heartbreaking attack on Sri Lanka, Christians and peace-loving people everywhere, and we stand with Sri Lanka. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we face a real threat from those who seek to divide us and to drive our world towards conflict, where far right nationalism and pseudo-religious extremism feed off each other in a dependent, destructive cycle? We need to stand up and challenge that hate and the best way to do that is to stand together with love.

Mr Hunt: I agree. That is the fundamental challenge. When we are trying to answer the important question of how we prevent this kind of thing from happening, the most important first step is to properly understand the motives of the people who try to perpetrate these attacks. We do not know that at this stage, but it seems clear that one was a religious motive to try and set faith against faith, and one was a cultural motive to try and target western tourists who are visiting Sri Lanka. We have to be alive to both of those, but the shadow Foreign Secretary was absolutely right in saying that one of the things that we can do to support Sri Lanka is—obviously subject to travel advice, which is very carefully kept under review—to continue to visit a country that depends on tourism to show our support and to show that we are not going to be put off by this kind of terrorism.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Whoever perpetrated these hideous crimes and whatever their warped ideology, they are murderers, and cowardly murderers at that. Will my right hon. Friend therefore convey to the high commissioner James Dauris, his staff and to the Government of President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe that we want to show our solidarity and sympathy with our Commonwealth cousins at this extraordinarily difficult time? Will he confirm—it may

be premature to do so—that many of those arrested to date appear to have connections of one sort or another with Syria? And if that is the case, will he look very carefully at extending whatever assistance he is giving to the Government of Sri Lanka to include offering similar assistance to the Government of the neighbouring Maldives, where there is also a problem with returning foreign fighters from Syria and where we have many British tourists on holiday at any given time of the year?

Mr Hunt: As I would expect, my right hon. Friend, being a former Minister for Asia, makes an important point. He is right that there are early indications of Islamist extremism that we need to investigate properly, and the Maldives is a very young democracy to which we want to give every support, so I will take his point away.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I am sure you will join me and other right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House in passing on our condolences to the former Member for Manchester, Withington, Keith Bradley, now a Member of the other place, whose sister, Dr Sally Bradley, was killed in Sri Lanka. Her husband, Bill Harrop, was also killed.

Dr Sally Bradley qualified as a doctor at Manchester University, worked as a GP in Salford and served as director of public health and director of medicine in the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which covers a large part of Greater Manchester. Her husband, Bill Harrop, was a firefighter, but not just a firefighter, and had worked in Manchester and received a commendation after the 1976 IRA bomb, which went off in the centre of Manchester. No distinction can be drawn between victims of such crimes, but there is something particularly monstrous and brutal about people who dedicated themselves to public service being killed in this fashion. I spoke to Keith Bradley yesterday and he told me he was being supported by liaison officers and wanted me to pass on his thanks to the Foreign Secretary.

I finish by asking the Foreign Secretary—I know what his answer will be, but it is worth saying anyway—to redouble his efforts to ensure that people in this country and elsewhere are as safe as they can be from the diaspora of ISIS in Syria and elsewhere.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for reminding the House that behind all these tragedies are human beings and for his moving description of the wonderful public service of Bill Harrop and Sally Bradley. I pass on my condolences to Keith Bradley—and indeed to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who also lost a relative in the attack. I was privileged when Health Secretary to see at first hand the extraordinary work of the Greater Manchester emergency services in combating terrorism after the arena bombing, but I had not realised Bill Harrop's connection to fighting terrorist incidents in that city. It makes it all the more moving.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I join others in expressing my horror at and condemnation of the stomach-churning cruelty and appalling depravity of these attacks on innocent worshippers and tourists. Does the Foreign Secretary agree it is vital that this

appalling atrocity not deter Sri Lankans in their efforts to press ahead with peace, reconciliation and accountability following the long years of conflict in that country?

Mr Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point; it is of course the bigger picture. The extraordinary change in Sri Lanka, compared with 20 or 30 years ago, means it is now possible to visit all parts of the country. It has made incredible progress in tackling terrorism, and that must not be obscured by this horrific incident, so she is absolutely right to say that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): As we mourn all those who died in this Easter Sunday massacre, the Foreign Secretary will be aware that ISIS has sought to claim responsibility, saying it had

“targeted nationals of the crusader alliance...and Christians”.

If that proves to be the case, does it not show that although its forces may have been defeated on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, its ideology has not, and does that not make it all the more important that on this day and every day in the future we stand shoulder to shoulder with all those who stand for the right of all God’s children to freely practise their religion in safety and peace in the face of such barbaric hatred?

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Gentleman speaks incredibly powerfully and I absolutely agree with him. Sadly, I doubt we will ever defeat the ideology of hatred, because it is a persistent feature of human existence, but we must be ready to stand up and fight it in whatever guise it emerges. He is absolutely right, too, that the territorial defeat of Daesh does not mean the ideological defeat of Daesh. We must continue to redouble our efforts in precisely the way he says.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It was a privilege to listen to the statement by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and to the response from the shadow Foreign Secretary. They spoke with great passion and integrity. I cannot have been alone this weekend in holding my children that much closer after reading Ben Nicholson’s heartbreaking words and hearing of his enormous courage.

This issue offers a challenge to us here in this House, as so much of our debate in the last year or two has been inward-looking; we must look outwards, and in doing so we must not only support the people of Sri Lanka at this incredibly difficult time. Will my right hon. Friend also redouble efforts elsewhere and, in supporting Christian communities around the world, on the advice of the Bishop of Truro, also support other communities threatened by terrorism? We might not be world leaders in every field, but there are a few areas where we really are: intelligence, diplomatic support and training to important allies and partners is one area where we can make a real difference. I welcome the work of the Metropolitan police and the units already deployed, and I know there is much more he cannot talk about, but it would be good to know that support is going to our friends and allies around the world.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes an important point and subtly alludes to the challenge we face at the moment. Preoccupied as we are in the House with one big issue, we should not forget that the rest of the world

looks to this country to show leadership in tackling these big issues and wants us to get back on the job as quickly as possible. When it comes to freedom of religious belief, it is important to remember that terrorism is not the only issue; there is also in many countries state-sponsored oppression of people who just wish to practise their faith freely. That is why our work will look not only at what we can do to prevent such terrorist incidents, but at how we can use diplomatic levers to stand up for the right of people all over the world to do what we can do in this country, which is practise our religion freely.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary and shadow Foreign Secretary for their moving words, because the events and stories coming out of Sri Lanka are truly heartbreaking. To attack churches on Easter Sunday in this way, and the streets and hotels, is vile. They are right that the extremists and terrorists are seeking to divide us and that it is important to bring people together. Does this not show the importance of our international intelligence and security partnerships and our ability to use them in support of Sri Lanka and other countries in the international fight against ISIS and extremism? Does it not also show that this work is about supporting peace and saving lives?

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Lady understands this area very well, from her former role as shadow Home Secretary, and is absolutely right. We in this country are lucky to have superb intelligence services and strong intelligence relationships all over the world, which we need to keep each other secure, and I can absolutely give her the assurance that, even though these things happen under the surface, they are a very important part of our counter-terrorism effort.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement.

This is so sad for Sri Lanka. It takes us back to the dark old days of which my right hon. Friend has spoken. Such cold, calculated attacks make us all think about the character and the thought processes of those involved—or, dare I say, the lack of any thought at all. As has already been said, to attack Christians on Easter Sunday was nothing short of barbaric.

I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s assurance that Britain will never just stand by and has already committed resources to support the Sri Lankan Government, but will he go further, and say that Britain will support not only Sri Lanka but others in tackling this global threat? It appears that ISIS has influenced and integrated into domestic organisations in Sri Lanka without which these organisations would not have been able to cause such devastation.

Will my right hon. Friend also confirm that this event has strengthened his resolve—I know that this is a personal mission of his—to ensure that we tackle the persecution of Christians around the world, which too often goes unreported?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to give my hon. Friend a personal commitment that I want to do more on this front, and also to tell him that the United Kingdom is a world leader in countering extremist disinformation online. We have developed particular expertise over the past five years or so, and we share our information widely.

[Mr Hunt]

My hon. Friend is right to say how coldly calculated this attack was. To co-ordinate six explosions to take place at virtually the same moment required an enormous degree of planning. Those people knew exactly what they were doing. They spent a long time planning the attacks and finding the recruits to carry them out. We have to think hard about the kind of people who would do such a thing, and I hope that will mean that we redouble our efforts to ensure that it does not happen again.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I join the Foreign Secretary, the shadow Foreign Secretary and colleagues across the House in utterly condemning these terrorist attacks. My thoughts are with the victims and their families.

Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the focus on protecting religious minorities—in this case, Christian minorities—must be redoubled? The atmosphere of intolerance towards religious minorities in different countries—whether they are Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews or Hindus—has increased, and the international community must step up to provide that protection, as well as security for minorities.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Let me also commend her for the work that she has done in championing the rights of Rohingya Muslims in Burma; I think that my first contact with her when I became Foreign Secretary was in that connection.

It is important to understand that it is an easy first step to target and attack someone because of their religion, and that in very poor countries where many people have not had a proper education it is easy to whip up feelings in a way that can be lethal.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend and the shadow Foreign Secretary for what they have said this afternoon. The freedom to practise a faith—in the community or alone, in public or in private—or to change one's religion, or follow none at all, goes to the heart of what freedom means. Does my right hon. Friend agree that freedom of religion is not an optional extra but goes to the heart of our freedom values, and will he confirm that he will continue the excellent work that he has begun in his Department, which has made that a central focus?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Freedom of religious belief is just a form of freedom of belief. The fact is that states which try to control what people believe will try to affect their human rights in many other ways as well. One of the points made by the Archbishop of Canterbury is that the countries that have the biggest problems when it comes to freedom of religious belief tend to have the biggest human rights problems generally. That is a kind of litmus test of the freedom that people have in different countries, which is why it is such an important issue.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

As many Members have said, terrorism does not discriminate between the rich and the poor, and will target people whatever their age, sex or gender, nationality

or religion. The harrowing vista that we have seen since the Easter weekend grows more sorrowful as each day passes, and as more stories unfold about the barbaric acts that took place in Sri Lanka. The Foreign Secretary will be aware of the book of condolence that has already been opened in the high commission, and I hope that he will encourage people to sign it.

Can the Foreign Secretary assure the House that, as the days unfold, he will examine the sources of all the financial support that flows from the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries to political groups in Sri Lanka, and can he confirm that none of that support makes its way to radicalised groups or individuals there?

Mr Hunt: Rather than responding to the hon. Gentleman from the Dispatch Box, I will look into the work that we are doing and, if I may, write to him giving the full details. I know that we do an enormous amount of work in trying to strangle the sources of terrorist funding throughout the world.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My right hon. Friend and the shadow Foreign Secretary set the tone for this set of exchanges. I think that more and more people are saying, as they did when the Provisional IRA was at its peak, "This has not been done in our name"—even people who may somehow be beyond those who know what they are doing in directing violence of this kind.

I spent Christmas with my family in a church in Sri Lanka at a multilingual service. During our time in Sri Lanka, we were very impressed by the intercommunal peace and harmony. It was clear to us that tourism matters a great deal to the development of Sri Lanka as it recovers from its past. I hope that people will soon realise that they can travel to Sri Lanka safely and enjoy helping it to put itself back on its feet.

We must do what we must also do in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries where people have tried to destroy the prosperity of others in the countries that they share.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is also right to point out that there has been great progress in Sri Lanka, and great progress in religious tolerance. It is important to recognise that the extent of religious tolerance in any developing country is also a function of its political leadership. If there is leadership from the Prime Ministers and Presidents of those countries, it is possible to set the right tone when it comes to religious tolerance, but if those leaders fan the flames of populism or extremism, things can go wrong very quickly.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Let me express my sympathy and sincere condolences—and those of constituents who have contacted me following these horrific attacks—to the families of all who were killed or injured, and to the injured themselves. Words cannot describe the shock that was felt around the world. The despicable terrorist attacks which targeted the Christian community also killed or injured people of all faiths and none. This was an attack on humanity, on the values of respect and compassion, and on freedom of religion and faith.

The Sri Lankan diaspora community, including many people in my constituency and across the country, will currently be experiencing huge fear, anxiety and great concern for their friends, families and loved ones. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that as well as continuing to provide vital security, intelligence and consular support in Sri Lanka, he will ensure that support is extended to the diaspora communities here, given what they will be going through, and given that they will also have a vital role to play in helping Sri Lanka to heal?

Mr Hunt: I can certainly assure the hon. Lady of that. I will be talking to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about what support the Sri Lankan diaspora community might need. I will also be signing the book of condolence in the Sri Lankan high commission tomorrow, and I hope that I will have a chance to talk to the high commissioner as well.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): The interconnected nature of the modern world means that abhorrent atrocities as far away as Sri Lanka can hit terribly close to home. I am very sad to tell the House that the Nicholson family, who were so tragically caught up in the cruel and barbaric attack on the Shangri-La hotel, were residents of Upminster, in my constituency, before their move to Singapore. Will the Foreign Secretary join me, and the community that I represent, in expressing profound condolences to Mr Nicholson for the unbearable loss that he has suffered, and will he assure me that Mr Nicholson and other affected families will have access to the full range of consular and other support services in the difficult and dark days ahead?

Mr Hunt: I am absolutely happy to give that assurance. The high commission has been supporting the Nicholson family and will continue to support other families. I think the whole House has been touched, moved, shocked and saddened by what happened to that family, but also uplifted by the generosity of Mr Nicholson's response to an unspeakable personal tragedy.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): May I begin by thanking the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary for what they said? Unfortunately, this will not be the worst day we will have to talk about, because this Daesh death cult and its local affiliates will continue to carry out these kinds of atrocities globally. We must always say that this will not change our behaviour, it will not change our values and it will not change our solidarity with the people of Sri Lanka or elsewhere. We will stand resolutely with them in trying to get to the people who have done this and to stop other attacks.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his strong and powerful words as a former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I can only agree with everything he said. I think other countries around the world look to this country because of our, sadly, extensive experience in fighting terrorism here. They look to us for expertise, and they look to us to say and do the right thing in these terrible situations.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): May I join other Members in passing on my commiserations to the people of Sri Lanka as they seek to rebuild their

lives after these despicable terrorist acts? Will my right hon. Friend pledge whatever expertise this country has to help our good friend Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to rebuild that country? In particular, will he support Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's call for help in finding out how the use of better intelligence might have prevented this attack and might prevent future attacks?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to do that. I know that our Prime Minister was hoping to speak to Prime Minister Wickremesinghe this afternoon. We absolutely want to support Sri Lankan efforts to get to the bottom of what intelligence they received—apparently, it did not reach the politicians involved, although it is important to say that, even if it had, it would not necessarily have been possible to prevent these attacks. However, we will give Prime Minister Wickremesinghe every help he requests.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary and to my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary for the tone they have set. The Foreign Secretary mentioned that religious intolerance is about not just terrorism, appalling though it is, but oppression. Would he consider adding intolerance of those who do not practise religion? That is, in itself, a belief system, and a valid one, and it can also preach messages of hope and love. There are countries around the world in which having no religion is as dangerous as having the wrong religion. Would he be able to comment on that issue and on whether the Bishop of Truro's investigations could cover it?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely support what the hon. Lady is saying, because the whole point about freedom of religious belief is that people should be free to believe what they want, and that applies to people of any faith or no faith. A fundamental tenet of a free society is that people should be free to come to their own conclusions.

The Bishop of Truro's review is specifically about Christians. I hope the hon. Lady understands that that is because we have a concern that the plight of Christians worldwide has not had the attention that it needs, and we want to put that right. However, I will happily look into the issues she raises about humanist beliefs and other beliefs that are not attached to any particular religion, and write to her if I may.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I concur with the statements made in the House today of compassion for those who have suffered in Sri Lanka this Easter weekend. Across the world, whole swathes of humanity—by some estimates 250 million people in 40 countries—are being persecuted, intimidated, victimised, terrorised, tortured, murdered, deprived of their livelihoods and driven from their homes simply because they seek to practise the Christian faith, and this is getting worse year on year. I thank the Secretary of State for recognising that one of the best weapons to prevent such atrocities is the systematic and determined promotion of religious freedom and for the steps his Department has taken over recent years to address the issue—particularly the inquiry he has called for, which is an acknowledgment that more needs to be done. However, may I urge him to ask his Department for International Development colleagues to do the same, to engage with the inquiry and to look at what more DFID can do?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for the passion of her words. Last year, according to the figures I saw, 3,000 Christians were killed because of their faith, and that was double the previous year. These are largely some of the poorest people on the planet. The oppression of Christians, just to deal with that particular issue, is often concentrated in countries such as Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Afghanistan, where we have large aid budgets and therefore a significant degree of leverage with the host countries. One purpose of this review is to understand how we can better join up our Government Departments so that we really do use the influence we have.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Bishop of Truro's review, and its importance is highlighted by this awful massacre. My constituent Councillor Lakmini Shah, who is in Sri Lanka, points out that many children have been orphaned as a result of the attacks, and there is no safety net available to help them—hospitals have been overwhelmed. What immediate relief can the Foreign Secretary's Department and the Department for International Development give, given that many in Sri Lanka face a very difficult few months?

Mr Hunt: I will look into that if I may. I know that we would stand ready to help in any way we could with that situation. I am very pleased that the right hon. Gentleman asked that question, because it has reminded me of something the high commissioner asked me to pass on to the House and, through Members here this afternoon, to their constituents. He strongly encourages anyone who is in Sri Lanka on holiday to contact their friends and family just to say that they are safe. Obviously, there are a lot of people at home worried about what may have happened.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the statement. In Essex, there is a very strong Tamil community. Will he express his condolences to the Tamil community, particularly regarding those Tamils who lost their lives in this horrific terrorist atrocity? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said, we could use this tragedy to bring about reconciliation with the Tamil community in Sri Lanka.

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to do that. There is a very large Tamil Christian community in Sri Lanka. The important work that has happened over the last decade to achieve reconciliation between Tamils and Sinhalese also needs to be about religious reconciliation and religious tolerance.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Undoubtedly, questions will need to be answered and lessons will need to be learned, but today is not the day for that. Will the Foreign Secretary therefore reassure the House that the UK stands ready to help Sri Lanka with whatever it needs? Furthermore, does he agree that the world, and not just Sri Lanka, may need to reflect on the learnings that come out of any investigation, particularly when it comes to the persecution of faiths?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to give the hon. Lady that undertaking. I think a number of hard lessons will need to be learned about what happened, not least because it does seem, from statements that the Sri Lankan

Government have given, that there was some intelligence forewarning of these attacks, although we do not yet know whether that meant that they could have been prevented.

However, we are also keen to understand broader issues around freedom of religious belief. My own view is that the issue has been talked about a lot in the United States but not so much in Europe, and it is important that we have our perspective on it, which might be different from the perspective in the United States. That is absolutely our intention.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I join others in the House in congratulating the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary on the respectful way in which they have conducted this debate. We in this House rightly protect people's right to worship in whichever way they wish, but the Pew report has stated that Christianity is the most persecuted of religions, and the Open Doors report states that the persecution of Christians is on the increase. This shows the challenge that we face. Every day across the world, Christians face violence, intimidation and death just for worshipping Jesus Christ. What advice would the Foreign Secretary give to people like me who have constituents who are missionaries in Sri Lanka and around the world? What practical steps, alongside the Bishop of Truro's investigation, can the Government take to protect Christians across the world?

Mr Hunt: It has always been a brave thing to be a missionary, and I urge them to ensure that they are fully abreast of Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice in order to maintain their own safety. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that there is a broader issue here. The Open Doors report says that 245 million Christians are persecuted every year, and we think that around 80% of the people who are persecuted for their faith are Christians. That is why the independent review by the Bishop of Truro is so timely.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I will not be the only person in this House who finds 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning to be the most peaceful time for practising their faith, but until recently it has felt like the safest time as well. There is no doubt, however, that recent events in Pittsburgh, Christchurch and Sri Lanka have highlighted the fact that there are now attempts to attack people as they go to worship God, whichever God they believe in. The Foreign Secretary spoke about ensuring that we share our experience of counter-terrorism, and I am glad that he is doing that with Sri Lanka, but the reality is that this now appears to be emerging in a number of countries. Can we therefore ensure that we share these resources proactively, starting with the 50 countries that are on the world watch list, to ensure that events such as these do not happen again?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. When we have the Bishop of Truro's report, I want to look at how we can build a coalition with other countries worldwide that have concerns about freedom of religious belief so that we can start spreading those lessons. One of the most important things we can do is to ensure that we express our views to any Governments, particularly in younger democracies, who might be tempted to resort to populist messages that can lead to discrimination against religious believers of one faith or another, and to make them aware of the dangers of that approach.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): This was a horrific and cowardly series of attacks against Sri Lankan nationals, tourists and Christians who were gathering together on the holiest day of the Christian calendar to celebrate their faith. According to the Open Doors world watch list, 11 Christians lose their lives every day because they are practising their faith. What more can the Department do to protect them from persecution and to share the counter-intelligence initiatives that are needed to protect us all?

Mr Hunt: There are two specific things. When it comes to countering terrorism, we in this country have huge expertise and we share it with as many countries as we can in order to try to prevent terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, however, a lot of the persecution that the Open Doors report talks about is state organised and state sponsored, and in those cases we can use our diplomatic levers and those of our friends in other countries who share our values, to try to make it clear that that is not the right way forward.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I thank those on both Front Benches for their response today and particularly for their defence of pluralism. They outlined their horror, which we all share, of innocent people being attacked in their place of worship, where they should feel safe. I agree with the Foreign Secretary about the importance of religious freedom and of the capacity of different faiths to live together and coexist in peace but, given these attacks, there will be people even in this country who are now more nervous about their own places of worship. What assurance can he give to people here that the maximum measures are being taken to defend the pluralism and freedom of worship that we enjoy here in the UK?

Mr Hunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. I think he would agree with me that the extraordinary advances that humanity has made since the time of the Enlightenment have come about because the human race has come to accept pluralism as a mechanism for progress. However, that principle always has to be defended and I am afraid that it still has to be defended in this country. For example, we see some of the protection that is necessary around synagogues and mosques, although not yet around churches. We have to be eternally vigilant on these issues.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I wholeheartedly join others in condemning this sickening action. It is almost unbelievable that people could be so callous as to do something like this on Easter day. I believe that the Sri Lankan Government very quickly shut down social media straight after the attacks to stop the spread of fake news. We have been talking about what we can do to reduce terrorist attacks on the worldwide stage, and one way in which we can really help is by tackling fake news and the spread of disinformation and misinformation. Social media is such an easy tool for those who want to cause us harm, and I would like to ask the Secretary of State what he is doing about that. Is he speaking to colleagues about it?

Mr Hunt: What we call countering disinformation online is an area in which this country has been taking a lead internationally. We spent £20 million on it last year

and we have huge expertise. Unfortunately, we do not have to go as far as Sri Lanka to see these problems; they are also here in Europe—many of the eastern European countries are dealing with propaganda being pumped out into their social media systems, for example—and we absolutely do make that expertise available to our friends around the world.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I should like to put on record my condolences to all those affected by this awful attack. In the practical sense of supporting the Sri Lankan diaspora in the UK, what communication has the Foreign Secretary had with the Home Secretary about the current status of applications from people from Sri Lanka for asylum or leave to remain in this country? Some of them will wish to have the reassurance that they are in a place of safety and that they can stay here.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The Home Secretary was with me this morning when I briefed the Cabinet on the situation in Sri Lanka, but I will take up the specific concerns that she has raised.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Social media in this country was used on Sunday by members of the Tamil diaspora with whom I work closely to give me real-time updates and to share their horror and despair. Social media was also used in Sri Lanka to encourage people to donate blood because of the shortages in the hospitals there. The people of Sri Lanka are now unified in their grief, whether they are Sinhalese, Tamil, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian or of any other faith or none. What more can we do to work with the Government of Sri Lanka and the international community to cement that universal solidarity as that island moves forward?

Mr Hunt: It is early days, but I spoke to Foreign Minister Marapana yesterday, and our Prime Minister is due to speak to the Sri Lankan Prime Minister this afternoon. Our offer is there to support them in any way possible, but one of the things that we can do is what this House is doing this afternoon. We have had a nearly full house of people from all political parties wanting to show their solidarity with our friends in Sri Lanka, and I think that that is something of which we can be rightly proud.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I should like to associate myself with the comments of my Mancunian colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), and to send my deepest sympathy to Lord Keith Bradley and his family today. There are 1.2 million Catholics in Sri Lanka who will be frightened to go to mass this coming Sunday. The Church aid agencies are saying to me today that the two priorities are security intelligence, to help the Government there, and expertise to help to rebuild family lives. The Foreign Secretary eloquently covered those two matters in his statement, but will he personally undertake to look at how well the Foreign and Commonwealth Office does in those two areas, to help to inform the Mountstephen review?

Mr Hunt: I would of course be happy to do that. Sadly, what happened in Sri Lanka will colour the review and make us consider the issues around terrorism

[Mr Hunt]

more fully. When we originally set up the review, we were perhaps not thinking that that would be such a big focus, but I think it must be.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Having visited Sri Lanka several times over the past 30 years, I am acutely aware that what makes Sunday's events even more tragic is the progress that has been made in that country over the last 10 to 15 years, including prosperity, national unity and the real prospect of it becoming a tiger in south-east Asia. Will the Secretary of State reiterate our commitment to work with the Sri Lankan Government and people to ensure that they build on the progress that they have made over the past 10 to 15 years, so that they can become that prosperous and unified country?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are the penholder for Sri Lanka on the United Nations Security Council, so we have a particular responsibility to ensure proper accountability and reconciliation as part of the progress that is being made. I thank him for pointing out that progress. In these dark moments, it is important not to forget that there is actually a lot of hope in the country given the progress that has been made over the past 10 years.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary for their comments today. Whether in a Christian church in Sri Lanka, a Pittsburgh synagogue or a mosque in Christchurch, the targeted murder of people at prayer because of their faith is a particularly heinous and hateful act of terrorism. Given the dangerous levels of intolerance in the world today, does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is incumbent on each of us, as elected representatives, to reflect on the words that we use, the arguments that we engage in, and the way in which we conduct our political debate to ensure that we contribute to a world that is more tolerant and more inclusive, rather than breed hatred and fear?

Mr Hunt: I cannot really add anything to that, because the hon. Lady speaks powerfully of the responsibility of all Members, except to say that to do what she says is quite challenging. Elections are competitive things, and we get headlines by saying strong things that grab people's attention, but we must always ensure that we stand on the right side of the line and do not foster the kind of hatred that we so tragically witnessed this weekend.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is right that we should respond to this unspeakable outrage with a message of tolerance, calm and peace, but it is also right that this wickedness should not go unpunished. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our intelligence agencies, including GCHQ in my constituency, should be authorised to give their Sri Lankan counterparts whatever support is deemed appropriate to ensure that those responsible for this wickedness are brought to justice?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. I am pleased that he mentioned GCHQ, because it has done a spectacularly important job in recent years in helping us to understand the Daesh

networks and how they operate online. That has played a significant role in the defeat of Daesh in recent months, at least in terms of their territorial possessions.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) for her response. They set a perfect tone for this exchange. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) just said, we must consider how we behave and set high standards for how we conduct our politics if we are going to show leadership at times like this. Intolerance can reach into all our communities. Yesterday was the 26th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, and such events bring home to us the need for us all to face up to intolerance wherever it is.

If the Bishop of Truro is conducting an inquiry looking specifically at the Christian faith and at how Christians are being persecuted around the world, we must avoid any suggestion that we are setting up one religion to be more important than another, because people may seek to prey on that. I know that the Foreign Secretary would want to avoid that, but we must be aware of it.

Mr Hunt: I entirely understand why the hon. Gentleman raises that issue. I reassure him that we support freedom of all religious belief; it is just that we think that Christianity has been slightly left behind for various reasons. More Christians are persecuted than those of any other faith, so we want to ensure that we are giving that the proper attention it deserves without excluding any other faith from our concerns.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I also thank the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary for what they said and the way in which they said it, and the same goes for all colleagues. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the people of Sri Lanka deserve immense praise for the fact that there is freedom of belief in their country? We have already heard mention of Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and others who are able to practise their beliefs. Indeed, this atrocity was possible only because Christians were freely able to worship together on Easter Sunday, which is not possible in so many other countries.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes a profoundly important point, and I totally agree with him. The perpetrators of this evil attack were trying to stop freedom of religious belief, and we must ensure that they are not successful.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I thank the Foreign Secretary for his article in *The Mail on Sunday* in which he referred to the story about "God's smuggler", which he read when he was about 10 years old and I read when I was about 24 or thereabouts—perhaps that shows our age difference. He also said that Britain cares "about those who stand up for the right to believe", and I think that he spoke not only for his Department and our Government, but for MPs and for our nation.

The photographs of children at Sunday school or people who had closed their eyes in prayer only to be murdered because they were Christians resonate with us

all. Such grief brings us together. We can pray, but we must also provide emotional support, because both Sri Lankans and others have suffered life-changing injuries, and some families have also been deprived of their wage earner. Is the Foreign Secretary able to help in providing the necessary medical help to those who have life-changing injuries? As he rightly said, the Christians are probably some of the poorer people in Sri Lanka, so can we also reach out and give financial assistance? If we can do those things, we can provide the innocents with the practical help that they so badly need.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development will consider any need for that kind of support with the greatest of sympathy, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing attention to the people who have had life-changing injuries. Around 500 people were injured in addition to the more than 300 people who tragically lost their lives, including a local employee of the British Council and his wife.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Foreign Secretary, the shadow Foreign Secretary, and all colleagues who have spoken in the course of these exchanges both for what they said and for the way in which they said it. It is the right thing to do in itself, but I think I speak for all colleagues in expressing the hope that it might offer some very modest comfort and succour to the families and friends of those who have been slaughtered or injured in the course of these horrific attacks.

Northern Ireland: Murder of Lyra McKee

6.49 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): With permission, Mr Speaker, it is with great sadness that I wish to make a statement on the appalling murder of Lyra McKee in Londonderry on Thursday evening.

That evening the Police Service of Northern Ireland carried out searches at two locations in the Creggan area of the city, believing that dissident republicans were storing firearms and explosives in preparation for attacks. While the searches were being carried out, a crowd gathered, three vehicles were hijacked and set alight, and the police came under attack, with up to 50 petrol bombs thrown at police lines.

During the disorder, a gunman fired a number of shots in the direction of police, wounding Lyra McKee. Showing incredible bravery while still under attack, PSNI officers attended to Lyra as she was transported to hospital in a police vehicle. Tragically, neither those on the scene nor medical staff were able to save her and she died from the injuries she sustained.

I thank, once again, the police, medical staff and other emergency services for their bravery and commitment. On Saturday I had the privilege of thanking a number of them in person and of paying my respects to Lyra at the guildhall with John Boyle, the mayor of Derry City and Strabane District Council. As we signed the book of condolence, he told me the touching anecdote that he was one of Lyra's first journalism tutors.

This is, first and foremost, a personal tragedy for the family and friends of Lyra who fully expected her to come home that evening. It is a truly shocking and heartbreaking situation for them, and we can only imagine the devastating pain they must feel—something they should never have had to endure. I know the whole House will want to join me in extending our deepest sympathies to her partner Sara and her family, friends and colleagues.

Lyra was a brilliant, talented journalist and is a true loss to Northern Ireland. She was a role model to many, and she always fought to make Northern Ireland a better place. Nothing we say today can take away the pain that her family must be experiencing now, but what I can say to her family, the people of Derry and the whole of Northern Ireland is that we will continue to strive for peace in Northern Ireland. We are behind them, and we are united in rejecting those who seek to undermine peace with terror. They have no place in our society and they must be dealt with under the law. The people responsible for Thursday's sickening attack will never win.

This is also a tragedy for the community in Creggan and for the city as a whole. I am sure we have all been struck by the profound sense of anger at this sickening and callous attack. This was a young woman with so much hope and so much to offer, unlike those who have continually shown that they have nothing to offer.

It remains the case across Northern Ireland that small numbers of dissident republican terrorists remain intent on killing, but what we have seen in the days since Lyra McKee's death is that the communities they claim to represent and seek to control do not want them.

[Karen Bradley]

Those communities want peace, prosperity and progress, and they want no part of the sort of mindset that leads to the death of a young woman simply doing her job.

To those responsible for this act of terrorism, we say, “We have heard your excuses and your hollow apologies. No one buys it. This was no accident. There is nothing that can justify this murderous act, and you are being called out for what you really are.” Church and community leaders have united their voices in condemnation, as have those across the political spectrum. Those voices of peace are strong, united and louder than those who peddle hate and division in a city with so much to offer.

Strong and effective policing has reduced the number of national security attacks in Northern Ireland from 40 in 2010 to just one in the whole of 2018, yet, despite this welcome reduction, vigilance in the face of this continuing threat remains essential. The current threat level in Northern Ireland from dissidents remains severe, meaning an attack is highly likely. As the PSNI investigation into Lyra’s murder continues, I urge anyone with information to pass it to the police, or anonymously to Crimestoppers, so that her killer can be brought to justice. The brave men and women of the PSNI and other security partners will always have the fullest possible support from this Government.

I have heard those in Northern Ireland calling for the political leaders now to come together, and I am sure the whole House will join me in welcoming the united display from the leaders of the political parties in the Creggan estate on Friday. The Belfast agreement has formed the bedrock of peace since it was reached just over 21 years ago, and it must be upheld and defended against those who would seek to undermine it. I intend to hold discussions with party leaders later this week to see what progress can be made.

Our clear and overriding objective must be the restoration of all the political institutions established by the Belfast agreement. Northern Ireland’s politicians need to take charge, including in the vital area of tackling all forms of paramilitary activity, but today is not a day for party politics.

Lyra McKee was a young, vibrant woman who symbolised the new Northern Ireland—a modern, dynamic, outward-looking place that is open to everyone, regardless of their community background, political aspirations, race, gender or sexuality—yet, last Thursday, she was killed in the most tragic of circumstances. It should not have happened, and it cannot be in vain. All of us must take inspiration from what Lyra achieved in her life in wanting to make Northern Ireland a brighter place for everyone. Lyra once wrote of being part of the Good Friday agreement generation and of the need to reap the spoils of peace. Our lasting tribute to Lyra must be to ensure that we continue to work for peace for the whole of Northern Ireland. I commend this statement to the House.

6.55 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of her statement. The way the House listened to her today is significant in showing that we share her words and, importantly, the meaning lying behind them.

Of course we need to condemn, and we do condemn, those who perpetrate these acts of violence. It is sad that this statement follows a statement on the atrocities in Sri Lanka. In offering our commiserations to Sara—Lyra’s partner—and Lyra’s family, it is right and proper that we remember the brightness of Lyra’s life and say that it was a life well lived. She was most certainly a child of the peace agreement, and she was a young woman who lived her life in the way she chose, campaigning for the things she believed in. We should remember that bright spark and not simply the way in which that spark left the world.

I am struck by the contradiction between Lyra and the values she stood for and the values of those who chose to take her life, because that is the starkest contrast. Who represents the modern city of Derry? Who represents the Northern Ireland of today? I think it is the Lyra McKees, not the gunmen who mowed her down.

Londonderry is a greatly changed city over the 21 years since the peace process began. It is a modern city that is unrecognisable from the city of years back. Derry has also been changed by Lyra’s murder. The wave of condemnation from people of all backgrounds has sent a stark message to the people of violence who now find themselves isolated and out of touch with the mood of the people of Derry.

I also commend the cross-party solidarity, and it is significant that the leaders of the political parties have signed a joint declaration. It was important to see Michelle O’Neill and Arlene Foster walk from Creggan together. It was also important to see the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), a Londonderry boy, there. That is the leadership that the people of Northern Ireland are entitled to expect in light of this tragedy.

As the Secretary of State has already said, this is a foundation on which to build a different future—a better future. She mentioned the police and the security services, and we know there is a paramilitary threat not only from dissident republicans but from loyalist paramilitaries, sometimes involving gangsterism rather than political violence. Nevertheless, that violence corrupts and pollutes the society of Northern Ireland. I ask without any great criticism, but will she review the way in which we deal with paramilitaries of all backgrounds? We certainly need to look at the numbers, but perhaps that is for another occasion.

In conclusion, the phrase “not in my name” has been used an awful lot in recent days, and this House should say that this is not in our name and it is not in the name of our common humanity. Our common humanity says that we stand together with the people of Derry and we stand together with the people of Northern Ireland. In particular, across these islands, we stand together in saying that we condemn those who perpetrated this act and we celebrate the life of Lyra McKee.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and agree with much of what he said. He sums up eloquently, in a way that is typical of him; he is a very eloquent speaker at the Dispatch Box, and that was a particularly poignant and moving contribution. He is right to say that the whole House shares in the condemnation of the acts that took place. His comment about the brightness of life of Lyra was very moving. She did represent Londonderry. She represented Northern

Ireland, and she represented its future. As I mentioned in my statement, I was with the mayor of Derry and Strabane on Saturday, and he knew Lyra personally and had taught her; Councillor John Boyle said that Lyra was one of those people who wanted her name in lights—just not in the way that her name was in lights over the weekend, and that is the tragedy.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is definitely a sense on the ground that this is the end and people do not want to see this happen again. Those communities, which have been oppressed by the terrorists and the dissidents, and made to live in a way they do not want to live in those estates—they do not want to be part of that—are standing up and saying, “No, not in my name.” He is right about that. None of us can escape the symbolism of this. It was Good Friday and a woman, a journalist, an innocent was shot dead by terrorists. None of us can escape that. None of us can miss that. I also agree with him about the symbolism of the political leaders joining together on Friday in Creggan and being together. Great leadership was shown by all those political leaders; it was leadership that the people of Northern Ireland want to see, and I commend them all for what they did. We will need to talk about many things in the coming days, and I am happy to work with him on those, but at the moment, with Lyra’s funeral tomorrow, it is best that we reflect on the brilliance of the light that she shone and the future that she had that we will never see.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Viacom channel MTV appears to have been central to this awful tragedy, through no fault of its own. What can be done to ensure that media operators that, quite legitimately, seek to create content in conflicted situations of this sort are not involved, clearly against their wishes and much to their horror, in events of this sort, where there appears to have been a failed propaganda attempt by the New IRA?

Karen Bradley: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee. I know that he, as a former Minister in the Northern Ireland Office, is very familiar with the situation in Londonderry and the security threat the PSNI and security forces face every day. It is quite something to think that when actions like this happen in Londonderry it is almost normal—it is just what happens. The PSNI face petrol bombs and shots being fired at them. They sit in Land Rovers and take the fire and the onslaught. Clearly, we will need to wait to see, in the days to come, what effect the camera crew being on the ground had, but this also shows that a crowd had gathered. People came out to watch what was seen as being a spectacle. That just goes to show that these spectacles can have the most deadly outcomes.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement, and I echo the comments that she and the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) made. On behalf of the Scottish National party, I fully condemn this careless, cruel and cowardly murder. We send our deepest condolences to Lyra’s partner, friends and family.

Lyra McKee was simply doing her job at the time she was murdered, and it was a job she carried out with great skill. The New IRA has admitted its responsibility, saying that it was simply an “accident” and apologising

to her friends and family. But sorry is nowhere near good enough. Sorry does not bring Lyra back. Sorry does not ease the suffering of her partner Sara and of her friends and family. Sorry does not alleviate the concerns of communities across Northern Ireland about a step backwards to a past they had hoped to forget. Reading the statement, we would be forgiven for thinking that the past two post-Good-Friday-agreement decades simply had not happened.

This tragedy underlines what people in Northern Ireland have been saying for years now, and there is no possible alternative conclusion: the current stalemate has been going on for too long. So I am grateful for what the Secretary of State said in her statement about talks with the parties this week. Can she confirm what form they will take? Does she have a realistic goal as to when she thinks the Executive can be back up and running by?

I want to finish with Lyra’s own words, powerful words that highlight just what her murder has robbed us of. She wrote a letter to her younger self about growing up gay in Northern Ireland, in which she said:

“You will do ‘normal’ things. You will spend time with your mum. You will go to work and pay your bills. You will go to the cinema with your best friend every week because that’s your ritual—dinner then an action movie where things explode. You will fall in love again. You will smile every day, knowing that someone loves you as much as you love them. Keep hanging on, kid. It’s worth it. I love you.”

Poignantly, she also said:

“We were the Good Friday Agreement generation, destined to never witness the horrors of war but to reap the spoils of peace. The spoils just never seemed to reach us.”

Let us ensure that she is the last to suffer.

Karen Bradley: Lyra’s words need no comment from me; they are powerful enough in their own right. The hon. Gentleman asked questions about devolution. I would be very happy to talk to him and others about next steps, but I feel that today is a day when we should think about that family who are going to bury a much-loved partner, daughter, friend. They are the ones we should be thinking about today, and perhaps we can talk about the other things after that.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that although any death is a tragedy, the murder of a journalist is particularly abhorrent? Is she aware that Lyra McKee’s death came on the very same day when the world press freedom index was published, which showed the UK rising by seven places? At a time when the Government are rightly championing the protection of journalists, this terrible act is a dreadful stain on our record.

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend and I share the honour of having served in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; it perhaps did not have the “Digital” at the time he was there, but we have both been Culture Secretaries and both of us were charged with ensuring that press freedom was respected. The work he did as Secretary of State, which I was fortunate enough to follow on from and take up the mantle of, helps us to be in the position where our status on the press freedom index is improving, but he makes a powerful point about what we have seen in Londonderry and the murder of Lyra McKee.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I join the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State in their powerful words today in this House. Everybody is shocked and horrified at what happened in Londonderry just before the weekend. It has brought a palpable sense of real grief, shock and anger across the community at how a young lady who had so much to offer, Lyra McKee, was struck down in such circumstances. We had the appalling statement by those responsible that this was some kind of accident, as though it was okay to murder police officers. These are people—journalists, police officers and others—going about their proper business on behalf of us all, and they deserve all of our thanks and gratitude. Can the Secretary of State be assured that all of the political parties and all of the community, right across the board, are united in their absolute determination that we will move Northern Ireland forward and never return to the terrible types of incidents that we have seen on such a scale before?

Karen Bradley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for those comments. He rightly says that “shocked” and “horrified” absolutely sum up the feelings in Northern Ireland over the past few days. As I said in my statement, there is no apology for this—this was murder. There is no justification. There are no excuses. This was taking the life of an innocent, dynamic, bright, energetic young person, depriving her of her future and depriving her partner and her family of their loved one. There can be no excuse for that.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I join the Secretary of State in expressing my condolences to Lyra’s family and friends and to the whole community.

When the Chief Constable of the PSNI last gave evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, he told us how difficult it was, without there being an Assembly, for him to know month by month whether he had the funds to pay for more police officers. Given the increased paramilitary activity, will the Secretary of State assure the House that the PSNI will have whatever resources it needs to keep communities safe in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend highlights one issue that we face in the absence of an Executive at Stormont. I have said that I am determined to see the Executive restored as soon as possible, but I also reassure my hon. Friend that the Government stand committed to making sure that the PSNI has the resources that it needs, and we have continued to make sure that that is the case.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Last Thursday, Lyra McKee was murdered as she stood on the streets of Creggan in my home city of Londonderry. The following morning, a number of us—politicians, businesspeople, police and people from the local council—gathered in the city centre to discuss a response. The word came in that people were going to gather to show solidarity and opposition to the terror that had appeared on the streets the previous night. There was a decision to take about whether people should go. Those who know the geography of the city will know that I live on and represent people on the other side of the river, but there was no other side; there was only one decision to be made, and that was to go and stand in solidarity with those who abhorred such a deadly and tragic act.

Hopefully, the wider community will unite, because this week has been a particularly poignant one. It marks 25 years since Alan Smith and John McCloy were shot dead in Garvagh in my constituency. Constable Gregory Pollock was murdered by a mortar in Londonderry—he was the final policeman to be killed before the ceasefires were called—and his grave was desecrated for several years after his murder.

Does the Secretary of State agree that not just in April but in every month we must all stand against terror and murder, from wherever it comes, by whomsoever it is carried out and wherever it has occurred or does occur, so that we can deliver a better future for our people?

Karen Bradley: Hear, hear—those were very moving words. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman because the images of him in the Creggan estate on Friday—a boy from Londonderry, as he said—standing rock solid in solidarity with all parts of the community to condemn what happened were incredibly moving and important. Those images demonstrate more powerfully than many images could just how the people of Northern Ireland do not want to go backwards and want to stand firm together against the terrorists.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Lyra McKee was not just an amazing journalist and writer, but a passionate campaigner on several issues that cannot be taken forward in the absence of an Assembly. Nobody can have failed to have been moved and to have felt hopeful at the sight of real, incredible leadership from across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland in response to these events. Does the Secretary of State share my hope that this can be some kind of turning point in the political process, and that people can continue to show that leadership and resolve to move Northern Ireland forward?

Karen Bradley: I agree with my hon. Friend: we need to keep seeing leadership of the kind that was shown last Friday and over the weekend, because this is a moment when people can make a difference and do the right thing for the people of Northern Ireland, who really desperately need them to.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that in the face of this horrific terrorist murder it is incredibly important that the people of Northern Ireland hear the words of the House of Commons, and that we stand with those brave people, including the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) whose moving words we just heard, with the DUP leader Arlene Foster, and with Michelle O’Neill? Their condemnation, with others, of that terrible attack at least shows that we all condemn it and stand together to do so, and that they will not win. In the end, democracy will.

Karen Bradley: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman’s comments. He is quite right: they will not win.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am sure that Lyra’s family and friends, and particularly her partner Sara, will get some comfort from the measured and moving words we have heard today, not only from the Front Benchers but from everyone. Does the Secretary of State

agree that one thing that may well come out of this, hopefully, will be the fact that we have seen such unity throughout Northern Ireland—from all of Northern Ireland—in total condemnation this act? We should also remember that the PSNI suffers attacks of this kind regularly. If things are not changing, we will see more people die. We must be absolutely clear that this kind of terrorism has to be stamped out, and that it will be stamped out only by the unity we have seen here today going throughout Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady speaks powerfully and I agree absolutely with what she said.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I once had the privilege of being interviewed by Lyra when she was working on a book about the late Robert Bradford, who was Member of Parliament for Belfast South. I found her to be a warm, humorous and very talented young woman, and I echo the comments that have been made in sympathy with all her family and friends.

One worrying aspect of this incident was the young people present who were cheering as the gunman fired those fatal bullets that killed Lyra. We see displays of men in paramilitary uniforms who belong to this organisation, walking openly in Dublin and flaunting themselves in Milltown cemetery in Belfast. If we are not to encourage the next generation to believe that there is something right in what these people do, we must surely do something to prevent these naked displays of terror and paramilitarism in public places.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very powerful point. When I visited Londonderry on Saturday, I heard people say that they want this to end, that this was not what they wanted to see, that it was not the Northern Ireland they wanted to be part of and that these people did not represent them. The tragedy is that so many of the people involved are young people who were not even born at the time that the Belfast agreement was signed. They have been groomed by evil people who have put them in a position where they have ended up murdering an innocent journalist. We cannot allow that to happen. They will have heard the unity of the House's voice very, very loudly.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that there is nothing that can justify this act of violence, and she is right. This time it happened to be Lyra, a journalist, but it could have been a police officer or a citizen on the streets of Creggan. To support what the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) said, the key point is that these are proscribed organisations. It is an offence to wear material that promotes these organisations and it is an offence to support them. It is an offence to organise meetings and to have contact with them. There is a case for the Secretary of State, after the funeral, looking into what action can be taken on proscription and enforcement, to support the community and make sure that these people are outlawed among the community as a whole.

Karen Bradley: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we will consider carefully all the points he made. He will know that the Fresh Start agreement committed not only money but resources to the tackling of paramilitary activity. One of the problems is that that agreement is a

responsibility of the Executive Office, which is another reason why we need to see devolution restored. *[Interruption.]* I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, as he shakes his head, that this needs to be tackled and dealt with. He is right that tonight we need to think about a family who are grieving, but in future we need to think about such measures.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I add my own expression of revulsion at this most brutal and senseless act and offer my condolences and those of my party to the family of Lyra McKee and to all those who knew her?

At a moment such as this, I always think that it is important to identify some sort of positive towards which we can work. For my part, I hope that for whatever unwanted and unwanted reason that we may find ourselves here today, everybody now in this House and throughout the rest of Great Britain—I use the term Great Britain advisedly—understands that the peace in Northern Ireland is still a very, very fragile thing and not something to be taken for granted. We have seen in the most graphic way possible that when politicians leave a vacuum the men of violence will fill it. When the Secretary of State speaks to the parties in Northern Ireland later this week, will she give leadership and make sure that, as a consequence of that, we see the political process back at the centre of Northern Ireland's life again?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman talks about politics in Northern Ireland. Of course, Northern Ireland is one of the places in the world that has been most transformed by politics: politics won over violence; politics won over terror—words won. People made enormous sacrifices, both personally and collectively as a community, in order to achieve the peace that we have seen over the past 21 years. He is right that it is a fragile peace; things can flare up at any time, as we saw last week. Hon. and right hon. Members have talked about the regularity of these kind of attacks and activities. Business as usual in Northern Ireland is not business as usual as many people in Great Britain would expect it to be, or would accept, and that needs to change. It is absolutely clear that we need to have devolution restored, but the lack of devolution is not the reason for these attacks. These attacks have been going on for far too long. There is no excuse for the acts that we saw; there is no excuse for anything that we have seen; and there is no excuse for the person who pulled that trigger and shot Lyra McKee.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In the days following her brutal murder, Lyra's words have been shared around the world. It is not hard to see why. Just a few weeks ago, she wrote on social media:

“Derry is such a beautiful city. I've fallen in love with it over the past year, while falling in love with a woman who hails from it. Here's to better times ahead and saying goodbye to bombs and bullets once and for all.”

Can there be no better tribute that we make to Lyra than pledging ourselves to achieving her dream in her name?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady makes such a powerful point, but the words of Lyra McKee are the most powerful. Derry is a beautiful, beautiful city. It feels ironic in many ways, but on Thursday evening, I had the

[Karen Bradley]

opportunity to sit down with my family for the first time to watch the final episode of “Derry Girls”. To see the hope in that series, which was set around the time of the peace process, and to go to bed to be woken by that devastating news was just so tragic for such a beautiful city and for such wonderful people who really do deserve better.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Sadly, I am unable to attend Lyra’s funeral tomorrow in St Anne’s cathedral, and I know that other colleagues are unable to attend as well. On behalf of them, I extend our deepest sympathy to Lyra’s family, her friends, her colleagues who have spoken so movingly and so courageously about their work as journalists, and especially her partner whom she loved deeply and who loved her deeply—they should have been able to grow old together. Their lives are forever changed, and there will always be a gap at the table that no one else can fill.

I found the apology offered today by the New IRA absolutely nauseating. It cannot undo the grief, the heartache, the pain and the suffering of Lyra’s family, friends, colleagues and partner. It identified as the enemy PSNI officers—police officers—who courageously go about their business day after day and face this threat. They are not the enemy; they are there to protect the entire community—all of the community, as the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) has said—courageously and impartially. Will the Secretary of State just repeat the words that I have long remembered from a papal visit to Ireland: “Murder is murder is murder and it is always wrong”?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady speaks incredibly powerfully. There have been some wonderfully moving contributions and hers is certainly one of those. I am sure that Lyra’s family and friends will have heard her condolences. I am happy to pass on personally those condolences as I will be at the funeral tomorrow. About her comments and her quoting of the Pope, “Murder is murder is murder”—absolutely.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Lyra spoke about the dividends of peace not being shared. She was talking, I believe, about communities such as the one in which she was standing when she was so cruelly murdered. Does the Secretary of State accept—I know that she does not want to get into the restoration of the Assembly tonight—that if we are not going to see a restoration of devolution, she will have to find some other way, perhaps, of intervening, supporting and making a change in communities where young men are being raised to believe that those active in the troubles were heroes?

Karen Bradley: I am determined that we will see devolution restored because it is the right thing for Northern Ireland and the right thing for the people of Northern Ireland. I absolutely agree with the sentiments and the comments of the hon. Lady about the young people in those communities in Northern Ireland. She is right to say that those communities have been unable to benefit from the economic prosperity that we have seen in Northern Ireland largely because of how the dissidents behave and how they oppress that community. We need to see an end to it.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that it should not take a leading light of the future to be extinguished for hope to be reignited. Seeing those politicians in Northern Ireland coming together in memory of Lyra was hugely moving. I hope that the Secretary of State and others in the Cabinet will do everything that they can, because we have lost a leading light. Gail Walker, the editor of the *Belfast Telegraph* and Lyra’s friend wrote of her that “everything about Lyra was about the light.”

The LGBT community has lost a leading light. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) read Lyra’s letter to her 14-year-old self. It was so searingly familiar to me that I wish I could go back in time and read it to my closeted 14-year-old self, because I do not think that I have ever read anything that captured my fears and worries as a closeted teenager so well. Her light may well have been extinguished tragically at such a happy and successful point in her life, but I hope that we will all do everything we can to make sure that her legacy will shine on forever and that what happened will not be in vain; peace, as we know, is precious.

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Lady. I do not think that there is anything that I can add to what she has just said.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): The outpouring of grief for Lyra from her friends and from right across the community stands as a testimony to the wonderful kind person that Lyra was. I had the privilege of knowing Lyra personally. Indeed, she reached out to me and showed me great kindness at a very difficult time in my life. That is the sort of story that we have heard about Lyra. That is the person that she was. I know that I speak for so many of her friends today when I say that I just cannot believe that we are sadly talking about her death and her murder. Her testimony stands in direct contrast to the violent thugs who killed her and those who have attempted to justify that. There have been disgraceful, repugnant displays on the streets of Dublin and Belfast, and propaganda on social media. What actions will the Secretary of State take to ensure that these organisations cannot continue to spread the hate and the bile and to recruit more young people?

Karen Bradley: May I pass my personal condolences to the hon. Lady as a friend of Lyra’s? It must have been the most horrendous weekend to have heard the news and still be coming to terms with it. I thank her for being here and making her contribution; it is a great honour to her friend Lyra.

The hon. Lady is right about the way in which the dissident organisations operate, using social media and otherwise. As I said earlier, the way in which they operate, convincing young people—young men—that the right way to behave is to turn to a life of crime, is almost grooming. We do not tolerate organised criminality and dissident behaviour, and we need to see an end to it. I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss further what we can do.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Lyra McKee was a child of the Good Friday agreement, and grew up in the hope that we could leave behind

the idea of sectarianism and the division it caused. I was particularly moved by her comments in 2014, when she wrote:

“The Good Friday Agreement has created a new generation of young people, freed from the cultural constraints and prejudices of the one before. It used to be that being a Unionist or Nationalist was an accident of birth. You didn’t decide whether you were for the Union or not; the decision was made for you. Your friends were drawn from your own kind.”

Lyra represented a future where the only barriers to friendship were of bigotry and badness; and she represented a future of hope beyond that. I cannot help but feel a sense of loss for what Lyra represents—the embodiment of hope for Northern Ireland.

I am particularly concerned that organisations such as Saoradh seed that sense of division and hatred. Indeed, they plan to take part in events in Glasgow this coming weekend. Will the Secretary of State liaise with her colleague in the Home Office to ensure that we do whatever we can to prevent that horrible, toxic organisation from showing its face on the streets of Glasgow this weekend?

Karen Bradley: I will be very happy to take that matter up with the Home Secretary. The hon. Gentleman’s words and sentiments are absolutely right.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): There has been a typically selfish, self-centred and “we’re the only people who matter” response from the republicans who have tried to justify the murder this weekend, describing it as a “difficult time for republicans” and blaming it on the PSNI by saying that it would never have happened if they had not been there. Will the Secretary of State give this House an assurance that, despite the fact that these people can rent a mob, rent a riot and everything else to try to disrupt life, there will be no let-up in police activity to search out the arms of these people? Will she also assure us that the police will not let up in pursuing and bringing to justice those who spread poison and hatred through social media or at graveside speeches, or who strut around the streets in illegal paramilitary parades?

Karen Bradley: My conversations with the police officers of the PSNI, including at the Strand Road police station on Saturday, have given me absolute reassurance that the PSNI is determined to take those steps, and that there will be no let-up.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I echo the words of the Secretary of State and pay condolences on behalf of my party to the family and friends of Lyra McKee. I am sure that the Secretary of State values the need to accord safety to journalists bringing truth from conflicts. Following this horrific attack, would she consider working with the Foreign Secretary to propose a UN convention for the protection of journalists worldwide, to ensure that reporters in conflict zones are not treated as combatants?

Karen Bradley: I would be very happy to take that matter up with the Foreign Secretary.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the calm and thoughtful way in which she has led proceedings on this statement, and the way in which she reflected on the life of Lyra McKee,

her contribution to the community in Northern Ireland and her sense of purpose in dismissing the view that political vacuums lead to violence. In the four years that I have been a Member of Parliament, we have seen the Provisional IRA murder a constituent of mine, Kevin McGuigan; the New IRA murder a constituent of mine, Adrian Ismay; and, within the last two months, the Ulster Volunteer Force murder a constituent of mine, Ian Ogle. The Secretary of State was right that what happened on Thursday night/Friday morning should not have happened, and she was right to say that it cannot be in vain. But does she recognise that that is a call to action, that we need to see action and that the Democratic Unionist party stands ready for it?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The conversations that I have had with the political leaders across Northern Ireland over the last few days indicate that all political parties are ready for that call to action. As I said earlier, tonight we need to think about a family who are grieving, but we absolutely have to ensure that we get political leadership back into Stormont, because it is what the people of Northern Ireland need and deserve, and it is what Lyra would want to see.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her comments. Last week—in 2019—the New IRA murdered Lyra McKee in an indiscriminate shooting, depriving Northern Ireland and the whole world of a magnificent talent. She was an innocent bystander. We offer our sincere condolences to her partner, her mother and her family.

An apology from the dissident IRA is, of course, meaningless; it means nothing. I am sorry to say that the fact of the matter is that, unfortunately, they will kill again and they will say sorry again, and it will not mean anything to them. I remind the Secretary of State and the House of the murder of Joanne Mathers some 38 years ago, in 1981. This is the same IRA. There are new recruits—different people—pulling the trigger, but it is the same old men behind, directing operations. Joanne Mathers left behind her husband Lowry and her son Shane. Struck down for being a census worker, Joanne was a legitimate target as far as the IRA were concerned, and they deprived that family of a wife and a mother.

Will the Secretary of State give this House an important assurance? After the murder of Lyra McKee, 140 people gave evidence to the PSNI. Although we are pleased to see that an investigation is ongoing, is it too much to ask—for the husband and son of Joanne Mathers—that another investigation be reopened to ensure that those who perpetrated the murder of Joanne in 1981, the same as they did in 2019, are held accountable for their actions?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman made a number of points, the final of which related to the investigation of previous atrocities and murders. He will know that we have conducted a consultation into setting up the institutions that were agreed in the Stormont House agreement. We will publish our findings from that consultation shortly, but I would be very happy to sit down with him and work through where we are on that.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): May I too express my personal condolences to the family of Lyra McKee—to her nearest and dearest, her loved ones, her partner, her

[*Ian Paisley*]

friends and her colleagues? Grief is an awful bitter cup of which to taste, and no doubt the family feel that tragedy at the moment.

Lyra was on one of the first “Lessons from Auschwitz” visitations run out of Northern Ireland by the Holocaust Educational Trust; she took part just a few years ago. I understand from the leader of that group, whom I was in communication with this morning, that Lyra was clearly moved by her visit to Auschwitz, where she learned the vital lesson that people want to live for their beliefs, not to be murdered because of them.

Humanity has taken a terrible blow in the last few days and over this Easter weekend. That humanity is unbowed by terrorism, but it is only unbowed if we take action, and the actions that have been called for across this Chamber tonight will eventually fall to the Secretary of State. We cannot continue just to hope that something will happen. There has got to be more than words. The Secretary of State will have to take brave actions in terms of calling the Assembly together and in terms of putting it up to those parties reluctant to take action to either form a Government or not form a Government. That will fall to the Secretary of State.

The 17, 18 and 19-year-olds have no excuses. They do not have years of discrimination, and they have never known a terrorism war or mass unemployment. They have no excuses, yet there are people around them who will try to make those excuses. Pretty soon there will be no excuses for no action by this Government. We need action and we need an Assembly back; and you, Secretary of State, have to play your role in achieving that.

Karen Bradley: I want to assure the hon. Gentleman that I am determined that we will see the Executive re-formed. I will come to this House to talk about that at an appropriate time. I think that tonight, as I said earlier, is a moment for us to reflect on the life of Lyra McKee, but also, as the hon. Gentleman said, to reflect on the fact that this weekend we have seen the most heinous, barbarous acts across the world, reminding all of us of just how precious human life is. That is something

that none of us wants to see, particularly over an Easter weekend. I, as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, am determined that we will take the measures that we need to in Northern Ireland to ensure that it does not happen again.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for her words and pass on my own condolences to Lyra’s partner and the rest of her family, but also, especially, to the cross-community LGBT community in Northern Ireland on the loss of such an important figure in their movement to equality in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that to see, the other day, the political leadership of Northern Ireland, from the Democratic Unionist party to Sinn Féin and others, including the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), coming together gives us hope that the Good Friday agreement will continue for another 21 years.

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s comments. What has been achieved in the past 21 years in Northern Ireland is absolutely remarkable. We cannot go backwards. We cannot allow the men of violence to win. We have to stand united. That is what we saw on Friday, when political leaders from across the community stood united in Creggan. I am absolutely determined that we will build on that and that we will see not just, as he said, 21 years but much, much longer for the people of Northern Ireland to enjoy peace, prosperity and a future following the Belfast-Good Friday agreement.

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, for the second time today it is my privilege to thank all Members, from the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State downwards, for both the content and the tone of what they said. Those words have been sincere and powerful, and therefore valid in and of themselves. If, in addition to those virtues, the words that colleagues have expressed offer some modest comfort to Lyra’s partner, her family and all those who knew and admired her, and everyone who believes in the triumph of peace over war and love over hate, that makes them additionally worth while. Thank you.

Climate Change Policy

7.42 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the current climate change protests and on our climate change policy. I apologise to Members of the House if we are covering ground that we covered extensively earlier, but I think it is a subject that will bear as much scrutiny as we care to give it.

Colleagues will be aware that public concern about climate change has grown to levels never seen before. In recent weeks, it has been incredibly powerful to see people of all generations, across the world, voicing their concerns about a warming climate and demanding a global response to this global crisis. We have heard loud calls today that we should declare a climate emergency. My answer to that is that we can say words from the Dispatch Box all we like; what counts is actions. I hope to set out the many actions that we are taking that have enjoyed cross-party support. My fervent hope is that we will continue to tackle this enormous crisis in that spirit.

There is no doubt that climate change is the most profound environmental challenge facing the world today, and one where more action is urgently needed. We should not shy away from that fact; we must recognise it. We welcome the strong and growing pressure for action to cut our emissions, but we should also ensure that, while we acknowledge the scale of the challenge ahead, we try as hard as we can to build consensus around change so that communities across the UK and, indeed, across the world feel secure, optimistic and involved in our shifts to decarbonise the economy.

As I said earlier today, we should be talking about hope, not fear, communicating the progress that we have made globally and that we have made here in the UK. That demonstrates that this urgent action to decarbonise the economy can comfortably sit alongside opportunity, growth and employment. The Government entirely accept, and I accept, that concerted action—more action—at national and international levels is urgently required. However, I still feel that we must focus on the fact—because it shows that this is possible—that we have shown real leadership in the UK thanks to the cross-party consensus that we have forged on this since the passage of our world-leading Climate Change Act 2008, over a decade ago.

I want to update colleagues on this progress and to outline priorities. Again, I hope that Members will forgive me if I cover some of the ground that we covered extensively earlier. In 2008, we were the first country to introduce legally binding long-term emissions reduction targets. The right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) was very instrumental in bringing that legislation forward, but it also enjoyed strong cross-party support. For me, the Climate Change Act has been an absolutely seminal piece of legislation, because I am one of the few Ministers in the world who can stand here with high ambition and high aspirations as well as a legally binding set of budgets that we have to report on to Parliament. It is a great way of ensuring the climate action survives the political cycle, and it has delivered. Since 1990, as many Members will know, we have cut our emissions in the UK by 42% while growing the economy by 72%. We are independently assessed as leading the G20 in decarbonisation since 2000.

People talk a lot about the disparity between territorial emissions and consumption emissions. I invite Members to consider the latest data that shows that our greenhouse gas emissions, on a consumption basis, fell by 21% between 2007 and 2016. Indeed, they fell by 6% year on year—in the year to 2016. *[Interruption.]* It is true—that is the data. I would be very happy to write to all Members and share it with them.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Even a little Swedish girl can see it's not true.

Claire Perry: Well, again, I would be very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with the data and copy in Ms Thunberg.

Across the UK, almost 400,000 people are working in low-carbon jobs and their supply chains. It is a sector that is bigger than aerospace and is growing at a factor of two or three times the mainstream economy. We have continued to be active on the international stage. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) was the Minister who carried the baton at the Paris climate change talks, which were so instrumental in the world coming together, as it did previously in the Montreal protocol, to show that there is concerted international support for action to tackle these enormous international challenges. COP24 took place last December in the Polish city of Katowice—a city where you could taste the hydrocarbons in the air. That is what happens when you burn coal; it must have been what London was like in the 1950s. At that conference, we in the UK—I pay tribute to my excellent officials—helped to drive the work of progressive groups and secured global agreement on a robust rulebook that brings the Paris agreement to life. If you cannot measure it, Madam Deputy Speaker, you cannot manage it. We are continuing to take targeted and impactful actions to support ambition internationally through promoting global alliances and collaborations, from the Powering Past Coal Alliance—which now has over 80 members that, like the UK, are committed to rapidly ending the use of coal as a source of electricity generation—to the Carbon Neutrality Coalition.

I was frequently asked this afternoon, “What are some of things you have done in the last six months?” so I thought I would focus on a few choice morsels to share with colleagues. Colleagues will, I am sure, be sick of me waving around the “Clean Growth Strategy” document that we published in November 2017. We will continue to do that, because it is one of the most comprehensive documents that any Government across the world have put out, detailing how we will take decarbonisation action across the economy. To date, we have acted on the vast majority of those actions. I will highlight some of them.

Only last month, I launched the offshore wind sector deal, including a £250 million growth partnership with investors to ensure that we will continue to invest in the North sea—the best place in the world for offshore wind. We will, crucially, drive up the UK content of that nascent industry to over 60%, and we will ensure that the industry employs at least 30% women by 2030. This industry is regenerating coastal communities right around the UK. It is one in which we lead the world, and we will continue to do so.

[*Claire Perry*]

In the spring statement, the Chancellor introduced the future homes standard, which will require all new homes to have low-carbon heating systems and world-leading levels of energy efficiency by 2025. That will radically transform house building in constituencies such as mine, where most homes are not connected to the gas grid. He also announced that we will increase the proportion of green gas used in the grid, in a bid to drive down the carbon profile of the hard-to-decarbonise heating network.

Only this Easter weekend, we had the longest run ever in this country of no coal contributing to power generation on the grid. When many of us were elected to this House, coal contributed 40% of our electricity. Our unilateral policies, including a carbon tax and emissions targets, have led us to do something utterly transformational that other European countries have been unable so far to replicate. We also continue to contribute internationally. We are one of the largest donors of overseas development assistance, with more than £6 billion committed in this Parliament. In January, UK Climate Investments announced almost £30 million of investment in a dedicated African renewable energy company, to try to make projects marketable and investable in much of the developing world, so that those countries never have to go through a high-carbon stage in their growth cycle.

Action is being taken not just in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy but across Government. We have published the ambitious 25-year environment plan and kick-started the creation of a vast northern forest, which will see 50 million trees planted from Liverpool to Hull. Tree planting is one of the most cost-effective ways to sequester carbon and improve soil conditions, as colleagues will know. Our new resources and waste strategy outlines steps to reform the packaging producer responsibility system, introducing a deposit return scheme and food waste collection scheme.

We should celebrate those actions, not to imply that we are in any way complacent or do not need to go further much more rapidly, but to demonstrate that this is a win-win for both the planet and future generations' jobs and prosperity. As colleagues will know, last year we celebrated our first ever Green Great Britain Week, and I can announce that we will continue that process annually, with the second time on 4 November this year. We look forward to the celebrations and challenges around that.

We have not shied away from our responsibility. That is why, after the publication of the chilling Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 1.5° C report, we were the first industrial economy to ask our Committee on Climate Change for advice on our long-term targets, and particularly a net zero target. I look forward to receiving its advice on 2 May and will engage with colleagues across the House on our next steps in the light of that. It is worth pointing out that the last time we asked for this advice, the committee told us it was not feasible to do from either a technological or cost point of view, so it will be extremely interesting to see what has changed and how we can rise to that challenge.

I have the utmost respect for those who are pushing for stronger action to address the risk of uncontrolled climate change. The right to protest peacefully is a long-standing tradition in this country and a vital

foundation of our democracy, and it has been good to see that the demonstrations have by and large been good-natured, and the policing response has been sensible and proportionate. I welcome the passion and fervour of the protestors and their constant reminder of our duty to raise our eyes from the next few years of conversations about our relationship with Europe, to think about the long-term challenges we face. I hope that those who have taken their passion public will continue to express their views without disrupting the daily lives of ordinary people, endangering the safety of the public or undermining the consensus that I strongly believe we will need to support further, bolder action.

We must work together to solve the challenge of climate change—in this House, in the other place, in classrooms and boardrooms across the UK, in international negotiating huddles, in homes and throughout civil society—and to deliver the broad, just and progressive action on climate change that we urgently need.

7.53 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Mr Speaker has graciously allowed both an urgent question and statement on climate change today. That is unique in my remembrance, but it is uniquely appropriate, given the visit of Greta Thunberg to the House today. Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank Mr Speaker for that.

In our earlier discussion, we focused almost exclusively on emissions reduction and energy policy, so I would like to start by asking the Minister to enlighten the House on the other aspects of our climate change policy that received less attention. Let us start with the national adaptation plan. The Minister will know that, of the 56 climate risks and opportunities identified by the Committee on Climate Change, 27 simply do not feature in the Government's plan. Why is there no word on the transition for flood-affected areas ahead of the withdrawal of Flood Re? Why is there nothing on the dangers to elderly people's health from overheating in summer?

Even where targets are set, there is a record of failure. The woodland cover target calls for 5,000 hectares of new plantation every year, so why is the rate so far only 1,500 hectares—less than a third? Has the Minister examined the work of Professor Ian Bateman on the differential natural capital values of such plantation depending on its location in relation to urban areas? What account is she taking of that? Over the last two years, increasingly frequent severe weather events have cost our economy £1.5 billion a year. In 2016, the Government acknowledged the increased risk of flooding and coastal erosion and accepted that the current levels of adaptation were inadequate. They promised to update their flooding and coastal erosion management strategy by 2019; 2019 is here so where is the updated strategy?

We naturally focus on the impacts on human communities, but the impact on our biodiversity is devastating. It is only through a coherent and comprehensive network of protected areas that our biodiversity will not suffer further loss. What does the Government's climate strategy do to restore the 50% cut since 2010 to the income of Natural England, which is responsible for monitoring and maintaining that network?

The Minister said in her response to the urgent question that she does not see the value of declaring a climate emergency. The value is this: it tells the truth.

On emissions reduction, the truth is that we are making some progress. I acknowledge and welcome that, but the full, honest truth is that we are not making progress fast enough. The Government's own statistics show that. The fourth carbon budget is set at a limit of 1,950 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent, but current policies are off track, projecting an overshoot of 5.6%. To counteract that overshoot, we will have to reduce emissions even further during the fifth carbon budget period. Because of that overshoot, we will need to reduce emissions by 334 million tonnes. Current policies leave us only halfway between where we expect to be at the end of the fourth carbon budget and where we need to be by the end of the fifth.

The Government have rightly asked the Committee on Climate Change for its advice on reaching net zero emissions, and I welcome the Minister's assurance earlier that she will bring the Government's response back to the House expeditiously. But I gently make the point to her that if we are already off track to meet our existing targets, we need urgent action to get anywhere close to meeting net zero.

The Minister spoke earlier of cross-party support on climate change. It already exists: the Labour party, the Green party, the Lib Dems, the SNP and Plaid Cymru all agree that we need to declare a climate emergency. We would love it if the Conservatives joined us. Will they? If we are to stand any chance of winning the battle against climate change, we must work together over the decades ahead to ensure that we are cutting our greenhouse gas emissions at the scale and pace demanded by the science.

Labour has already committed to enshrining a net zero emissions target in law, as have a number of other parties. Indeed, more than 190 Members joined together in a remarkable display of cross-party support for climate action in signing a letter championed by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) asking the Government to adopt a net zero target. Will the Minister commit today to taking whatever action the Committee on Climate Change recommends when it publishes its report and to enshrining the new net zero target in law? If the Minister were fully to accept the recommendations that the Committee on Climate Change report put forward, I give her this commitment: we on the Labour Benches will work as closely as possible with her and all colleagues across this House to ensure that we get a net zero climate target passed into law before the summer recess.

As the climate protestors have told us, time is of the essence and we cannot afford to let this important piece of legislation be delayed any longer than strictly necessary. The clean growth strategy that is supposed to meet those budgets is simply not fit to do so, and once we have enshrined a net zero target, the clean growth strategy will be out of date. Does the Minister therefore agree that we need a new, more ambitious strategy? There is no shame in recognising that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman has exceeded his time, but I will allow him to conclude rather than cut him off immediately.

Barry Gardiner: That is very gracious of you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try not to exceed the time that the Minister took.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman misunderstands: the Minister has rather more time on a statement than the Opposition spokesperson.

Barry Gardiner: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Earlier, the Minister spoke of the need to consider our international impacts: 97% of UK Export Finance support to energy in developing countries goes to fossil fuels, which is a subsidy to dirty, polluting energy worth nearly £5 billion. Will she look at that? We need even greater ambition and action if we are to inspire others in our bid to host next year's UN climate change conference here in the UK, and my party will wholeheartedly give the Government its support to achieve that bid.

Claire Perry: I see many colleagues standing, but I thank the shadow Minister for his commitment and his support for cross-party, and I want to answer some of his points.

The hon. Gentleman raised, rightly, the question of natural resources and the contribution they can make in carbon reduction. I am sure he will be pleased to know that, since 1990, emissions from that sector have halved. He is absolutely right that there is more to do, but they now account for only 15% of the total emissions pie. Indeed, there have been some amazing efficiency improvements, and I pay tribute to our farmers and to our innovative investors in this area. For example, it takes a third less CO₂ to produce a kilo of pork now than it did in 1990. However, there is clearly more to do, and he clearly points out something with which he knows I agree, which is that we have to take a whole-economy approach to making these reductions.

I will say to the hon. Gentleman what I said earlier about declaring net zero. The only way to ensure that the actions we want to deliver actually can be delivered is to make sure, when we set them out, that they are fully understood, fully costed and fully planned, and that we have buy-in from local authorities, civil society and so on. I am really looking forward to seeing the CCC's advice, but I will take the time that is required and work with whoever needs to be involved to ensure that, when we set that target, it can actually be delivered. I do not want to be the Minister who attempts to set out something very profound, only for it to be hived off because of other pressures that may occur down the line. If we make such a commitment, it must stick.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her outstanding record in her Department, on which I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd). Does the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth agree that one of the things that is essential in a grown-up discussion on climate change is that there should be a proper sense of proportion about what has been achieved and an understanding of what needs to be achieved, which everyone agrees is itself of the first importance? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the United Kingdom has been among the most successful countries in the developed world in growing our economy while at the same time reducing our emissions, which in itself is a very important lesson for the future?

Claire Perry: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments, and I would also like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood

[*Claire Perry*]

and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who did so much in this brief before I was lucky enough to take it on. My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) is absolutely right: a sense of proportion is hugely important. I can go further and say that not only are we among the leaders, but, according to independent research, we have led the G20 in decarbonising our economy through looking at carbon intensity. Again, this is not to say that there is not more to do; it is to say that it can be done—it can be done in a way that does not jeopardise energy security, and does not put undue cost burdens on consumers or businesses—and that while we know there is more to do, we should take hope from the progress that we have made.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): May I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement? I have to say, however, that this statement seems very empty. It appears to be a case of saying something because she has to say something, rather than because she has something to say. It is a reaction to the protests we have seen, rather than a real plan for the future or any indication that there is a real plan for the future.

Since there was no mention of it in her statement, may I ask the Minister: where is the Government's response to the report of the green finance taskforce? We were promised it in the spring of this year, and surely there should have been at least some indication of that in this statement on the way forward. Where, too, is the response to the comments of the Governor of the Bank of England warning of the economic risks of the low-carbon transition? Will the Government commit to creating a green and resilient pipeline of low-carbon projects, and will she clarify that institutional investors will be made responsible for limiting climate-related financial risks to pensions, savings and investments?

In June last year, the Environmental Audit Committee warned of an “alarming collapse” in investment in renewable energy, and this morning the Minister told us that wave and tidal power had been outcompeted for support. What are the Government doing to address the low investment in renewables? Finally, the UK is set to miss its emissions reduction targets under the Climate Change Act for the fourth carbon budget by 3% to 12%, and for the fifth carbon budget by 6% to 20%. Will she commit the Government to implementing the recommendations of its own green finance taskforce in full, and will she give that commitment today?

Claire Perry: As I set up the green finance taskforce, along with my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, I am absolutely committed to bringing forward many of its proposals. Indeed, we have been making progress on its proposals. We are very lucky—again, it is a source of great success for us—that we have one of the most innovative financial capabilities in the world, and we are really capable of advancing progress in that area. For example, we have set up the green finance institute; there is the green finance strategy, and more details will be coming forward.

The hon. Lady raised the question of wave and tidal, and I just want to clarify that slightly. It is a question of how, if we have a limited amount of money, we are best to spend it to achieve the decarbonisation targets we

want with the best value to taxpayers. I believe we have spent almost £60 million on innovation funding for wave and tidal—I will make sure that number is correct, and write to the hon. Lady if it is not—and we look carefully at every proposal that has come forward. I was very pleased to meet the Marine Energy Council, working on a cross-party basis, to see how we might do more to go forward.

Finally, I do not want to nit-pick, but the hon. Lady is citing numbers on the budgets that are simply not true. We are currently at 95% of where we need to be to meet CB4, which ends in 2027, and 93% of the way to meet CB5, which ends in 2032. Importantly, we are bringing forward policies and proposals all the time, including the proposals made in the spring statement, against which we have not yet done a CO₂ accounting. As the House knows, I am confident that, with a level of investment, focus and support, we will achieve these budgets. However, that will not be enough to get us to a zero-carbon emissions net target by 2050, which is why we will have to continue to innovate and invest.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Obviously, the public sector's contribution to this is equally important. What does the Minister have to say to companies such as Zebra Fuel in my constituency, which can play its part in bringing new technology on electric batteries to the public sector, but has actually found it quite hard, with its more innovative approach, to engage with many different parts of the public sector?

Claire Perry: I am disappointed that my right hon. Friend's constituents are finding it difficult to engage, because leadership in the public sector is actually something on which we can really demonstrate progress. We have introduced a voluntary public sector emissions reduction target of 30%. We have actually over-achieved on the central Government estate on narrower targets. We have set up a new greenhouse gas reduction target of minus 43%—of course, this also saves taxpayers' money—and we have things such as the Salix Finance programme, which provides zero-carbon funding through a revolving fund to ensure that the public sector can access funds where needed. I encourage us all to make sure that our local authorities are aware of that fund. If my right hon. Friend wants to send me any more information, I will certainly make sure that that engagement happens.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I want to ask the Minister about the global context. We have had 1° of warming already. Paris set the objective of no more than 1.5° of warming, but I think I am right in saying that the Paris pledges add up to about 2.7° of warming, and the world is off track on the Paris commitments. Can the Minister tell us what progress has been made since Paris on improving the pledges globally? It seems to me that very little progress has been made. In the run-up to the conference of the parties in 2020, wherever it is hosted—I hope that we host it—what is the strategy for getting there? People are out on the streets not just because of the domestic context, but because they think that a rise of 2° will be a disaster and we are going to go well above that, so the global context is vital.

Claire Perry: I am not surprised that the right hon. Gentleman makes such a profound point, given his experience. Whatever we do in the UK and however

much we talk about our progress, it is an infinitesimal part of the current emissions profile.

Two things have happened since Paris. First, I know it sounds very boring and dull, but the development of a rule book, so that we can look each other in the eye and hold each other to account on an agreed set of measurements, is really important. If we cannot measure it, we cannot manage it. Secondly, the COP next year will be important because we will set out our nationally determined contributions and be able to quantify, on a like-for-like basis, what the current emissions profile looks like.

It is incredibly important that the COP is successful and ambitious, but we should not forget how seminal it was to get 196 countries even to agree on that target and to agree a process for working together; that is unprecedented. My hope is that the global protests and conversations will focus the minds of Ministers across the world and result in a successful outcome from the 2020 COP.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I listened, “Blue Peter”-style, to the statement that the Minister made earlier, and I congratulate her on her bold assertion that there is no planet B. Does she recognise the actions of institutional investors to save the planet? The Church Commissioners, as shareholders, require the companies in which they invest to be compliant with the Paris agreement, thus demonstrating the power of market forces to effect change.

Claire Perry: Some of the most important meetings I have been lucky enough to have in this role have been with faith groups. Interfaith groups work extremely well, setting their own targets and using the significant power of their own investment might to effect change. During our first Green Great Britain Week, people asked, “What else can I do? I have turned off my lights; I am cycling a lot; and I am recycling.” The most effective thing we can do is to think hard about our pension funds—either through our investments or by lobbying trustees, such as those of the House of Commons scheme—because it is 27 times more effective to get an institutional investor to make the shift. The good news is that that is happening right across the world, and amazing groups, such as the Church groups, are doing it in the UK. That is the power of market forces, and such actions will dwarf the amount of money that Government are investing in this low-carbon transition.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I am proud to have supported the Climate Change Act 2008, and I pay tribute to the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). The Minister is right to say that progress has been made by successive Governments, but one area that is very challenging is the built environment. Does she agree that more has to be done, particularly in England? The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee is doing an inquiry on that topic, and the statistics are that the Welsh Government spend twice as much as the UK Government, Scotland four times as much and Northern Ireland 1.5 times as much. She keeps saying that we need action, so let us have action in this House by this Government.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point. The built environment can encompass homes, buildings and transport—

Albert Owen: I know what it means.

Claire Perry: Good. I was coming on to say that one of the most effective ways to influence the built environment is at a local level. I have been struck by the ambition of, and the progress made by, local authorities and combined authorities across the UK. Of course the Government can set ambitions and change regulations, but it is much more powerful for local authorities to say, “This is what we want to do, and this is where the investment needs to go,” and design it themselves. I have been particularly pleased, in the homes environment, with the announcement that we will not be building homes reliant on fossil fuel heating by 2025. Not only will that transform heating, but it will improve the market conditions and drive down the cost of that technology.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I am not entirely sure what is meant by declaring a climate emergency. As far as I am concerned, there is a climate emergency. The IPCC report gives us 12 years to get this sorted out, which is a nanosecond in climatic science terms. We do need to scare the pants off our constituents about the changes that we need to make, but it will only work if we carry our constituents with us. With their busy lives, they will simply turn a tin ear to finger pointing and negativity. We need to mobilise the essential optimism of the British people about the opportunities for change that exist right across the economy.

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I paid tribute to him earlier for making the point that this is not just about our atmosphere, but about our watercourses, our land use and our entire ecosystem. We must focus on the opportunities. When many people hear that we have 12 years to save the planet—that is a terrifying thought—they think, “What is the point? We cannot possibly change anything, because there is so much CO₂ and we will never get rid of it.” The point is that we can change, and we have changed. We have done so in a way that has not impoverished people or interfered with our energy security. Energy bills have actually gone down, because energy efficiency in the home has increased. These are myths that we must bust, and we must take people with us as we make the changes.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): When I met young people from Carlton le Willows Academy recently and received their petition, I could feel their frustration in what they said about climate change. They think we are sleepwalking towards disaster and we need to wake up. They think this Parliament is asleep. What are we going to do about that?

I ask the Minister to reflect on the language that she uses, because some of it sounds complacent. The Government have done things, but we need to convey the sense of urgency and explain how we are going to get a move on before the world collapses and implodes on itself. Building on what my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) has said, what are we going to do to bring the world together? This is a wake-up call for our own country and countries across the world, if we are going to avert the disaster that is staring us in the face.

Claire Perry: If there is any communication of complacency, I am horrified. I think that we have to focus calmly on the science. It is striking that in this debate, nobody has stood up and said, “This is a hoax,

[*Claire Perry*]

and it is not happening.” That is incredible, and it would not have happened 10 years ago. There is almost universal acceptance of the challenge and our progress.

One thing that I hear from young people is, “You have done nothing.” What does that say about what so many colleagues in this House have done for the past 10 years? Colleagues have done incredible things. They have supported huge changes to our energy system. When I was elected, 40% of our power came from coal. Over this Easter weekend, that figure has been zero, and it will be down to zero completely by 2025. That is a huge achievement. We must say to people, “You are right to encourage us to do more and to be angry with us, but don’t say that we have done nothing. None of you was asleep at the wheel before we got here, and we certainly haven’t been asleep at the wheel since then.”

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Minister elaborate a little on the importance she attaches to growing the economy at the same time as tackling climate change? Is it not the case that we will need to be able to invest in the technology that we will require to cut emissions further?

Claire Perry: Yes. One of the challenges that I have heard is that we need a fundamental reworking of the market-based system to solve all our problems. My recollection is that centrally planned economies historically had some of the worst records on environmental pollution, climate change and emissions. I have seen the power of the private sector investment that my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) referred to earlier, the technology and innovation that come from competition and things such as the auction system—I see the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who previously occupied the post held by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and who helped to design the system—which have sent the costs of offshore wind tumbling over the past few years. The market-based system does deliver, but we need Government to set ambition, to regulate where required and to convene where necessary.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): This statement is very timely, given that Marsden moor, outside Huddersfield, and Ilkley moor, outside Bradford, have been on fire—raging—this weekend. Today, there has been a machinery of government announcement that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is transferring greenhouse gas business emissions over to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and 12,000 companies will now report on that. In that new guidance there are just seven pages on water, three pages on waste, two on resource efficiency and biodiversity, and woodland creation, and the greenhouse gases associated with it, has been relegated to one page in annexe K. May I urge the Minister not to lose sight of the natural world? When the new greening government commitments are made in 2020, may I ask that every Government Department is properly accountable? Our audits have found that they are failing to meet them in both the policy sphere and in their own operations.

Claire Perry: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady and the Environmental Audit Committee. She knows that I and others are very impressed with the work she does. She

raises an important point. The whole-of-Government approach is so valuable. We can no longer just point to a silo and say that if we have solved that, the problem is solved. We have to advance on all fronts. I will look at what she suggests we review. If improvement is needed, we will deliver it.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Minister quite rightly outlined the very wide-ranging ways we are decarbonising across all sectors. That is absolutely the right thing, but does she agree that better management of our soils could go a very long way to achieving many of our emissions targets—indeed, getting to net zero sooner—if only we managed the soils better? We have a great opportunity to get this right through the 25-year environment plan, the Agriculture Bill and the environment Bill, which will be the biggest piece of environmental legislation since the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Does that not show that while we get the message about the crisis—we are hearing that—the way to put it right is through policies?

Claire Perry: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work on this topic, on which she is something of an expert. She had a very successful soil summit just before the recess. We have realised that some of the most cost-effective ways of sequestering carbon, such as soil improvement, changes in land use management and forestation, are also those that are best for the natural environment. I think we have all collectively realised how we need to continue to invest in these important areas.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In thanking the Minister for her kind words about the design of CfD auctions, which has ensured that Britain is a world leader in offshore wind, I have to say to her that I found her statement rather panglossian. Renewable energy investment has fallen off a cliff in the past two years. The major expansion in renewable investment was really about investment decisions made before 2015, which, I have to say, her former colleague, the then Chancellor George Osborne, tried to unpick directly after the 2015 election. May I refer her to the point made by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) on the Paris climate change treaty? Does she not accept that it was Britain’s leadership in the European Union on climate change that led to very ambitious targets adopted by heads of state of the EU in October 2014, that led to the Americans and the Chinese being more ambitious on climate change, and thereby to the Paris climate change treaty? What is going to happen when Britain is not at the table at the European Union showing that leadership?

Claire Perry: I would slightly challenge the right hon. Gentleman on the point about investment. He will know that investment can be quite lumpy—it depends on when you are having an auction round—and we are buying far more with less, because the price of renewables has fallen so much. We are paying far less per unit of renewable energy. I was very struck, when we launched the offshore wind sector deal, with how turning out that market provides investment certainty. There is a real lesson to be learnt there for other technologies. I do not accept the point that without the UK at the table we will no longer be able to push the EU and other countries. We will continue to have a loud voice in this area and continue to lead from the front.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does the Minister agree that no matter how strongly people feel about this issue, they do not have the right to block roads or to encourage students to take unauthorised absences from school?

Claire Perry: To peacefully protest is a fundamental part of our democracy, but I do think that forcing people to not take energy-efficient public transport on their way home, creating disruption for those going on a hard-earned holiday, and causing our excellent police force to give up their leave over Easter—I want to pay tribute to the police—should make people think long and hard about the tactics they are using.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister regularly takes me to task for not being positive enough about her Government, so I am going to surprise her. I am going to overlook the fracking, the expansion of Heathrow airport and the new coalfield up in Cumbria, and say that when it comes to global climate work the Government are doing good work. But even there, it is undermined by the work of the UK export credit agency, which is giving so much—billions of pounds—to more oil and gas exploration in some of the poorest countries. Will she surprise me in turn by saying she will be doing something about that?

Claire Perry: I have to say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that this is a wonderful day to have the hon. Lady being positive about the work that not just my Government but the whole of the UK are doing. She raises an important point about the challenge of investment. We of course support those industries that are highly productive and generate jobs and revenue. She will know that one thing we are looking at is to ensure we are not supporting, for example, coalmining. We will continue to look at that, but we also have to make sure that when we are supporting exports they deliver revenues and jobs for the Exchequer, so we can continue to invest in the low-carbon revolution.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): There is a genuine public appetite to protect the environment, but it is not always clear to people where to direct their efforts. That is where the Government have such an important role in incentivising behavioural change. Will the Minister advise how she is trying to harness that public appetite by better signposting people to ways in which they can do their bit, and how they might help her in lobbying other countries which have been less successful in reducing their emissions?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend will have hopefully heard our announcement that we will have our second Green Great Britain week, which is a brilliant week-long opportunity from 4 November to say what we have done, challenge others to do more and work right across the country. I would hope the whole country would recognise that if we are able to win the bid to host the climate change talks, not only would that be an amazing chance for us to help the world move to decarbonisation, it would also be an incredible opportunity to showcase some of our best green technologies and businesses. Hopefully people will realise the benefit that comes from those investments in terms of jobs and growth.

Mr Barry Sheerman: Does the Minister agree that we should all hang our heads in shame? The great political parties and all their members have not done enough.

We should be ashamed that it took a little Swedish girl to come here today and tell us that we need a sense of urgency and leadership, and recognise that we must act sooner rather than later to stop this threat that will destroy this fragile planet. Does she not agree with me that we should have listened to the scientists years ago? Twenty-five years ago, I started the Socialist Environment and Resources Association—SERA—a campaigning organisation in my party. We should have listened to the scientists then. We are still not listening to them clearly and closely enough now.

Claire Perry: We should have been listening to the scientists in 1950, when the link was first found. What has been important about Ms Thunberg's visit today—it is amazing to see the work—is that the conversation has gone from being niche, held between people who, like me, have long-standing interests in this area, to a mainstream conversation where everybody is talking about what it is that we need to do. That is why this is such a challenge but is so important. For the first time, the whole country is talking about climate change. I believe the whole world is talking about climate change and how we stop it. There are no deniers on the Conservative Benches.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The UK has a good and proven track record in meeting the challenges of climate change, from passing the Climate Change Act in 2008 to the emergence of a world-leading industry in offshore wind, which is bringing significant benefits to my constituency. That said, we can do more. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to dramatically reduce carbon emissions from our existing housing stock, which will tackle the scourge of fuel poverty, and will she consider recognising housing as a key component of national infrastructure?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend has been a marvellous champion of renewable energy. It was a delight to launch the offshore wind sector deal in Lowestoft and to see the regeneration that it is bringing to that proud port. He is right to talk about retrofitting homes. I sat on the green deal Bill Committee, as many others did, and we thought that we had an answer there, but it did not work. We have to keep going and recognise that such things as green mortgage lending could make an important contribution. Hopefully he will be pleased to see that we have focused the whole of the ECO budget on fuel poverty and have also upped the innovation component, because we need to have innovation in the area of retrofitting homes, particularly to drive costs down.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): There seems to be precious little action on achieving the Aichi biodiversity targets. The UK is on track to achieve only five of these 20 targets by 2020, so what action does the Minister intend to take to rectify this woeful situation?

Claire Perry: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is challenging the breadth of my knowledge on this. It is not my Department's area, but I would be very happy to engage with her further. She points out that we can no longer talk about climate, ocean and biodiversity as separate silos. We have to join them up, so I look forward to a conversation where she can perhaps educate me more on that point.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Authoritative research from Carbon Brief shows that the UK has now cut CO₂ emissions to the lowest level since 1888, that in the last seven years the decline in CO₂ emissions has been the fastest sustained fall in history, and that since 1990, the UK has cut carbon emissions faster than any other major economy in the world. Are not all three very proud achievements of this Government?

Claire Perry: I know that my hon. Friend's constituents in Kettering are among the most green-minded in the country, as he often points out to us. He mentions an important fact—yes, we have more to do, but we should be really proud of our achievements. People thought that this would be impossible, but it is possible and achievable, and we will continue to do more.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Despite the views of many in this House that Government action can control and fine-tune the complex world climate, the fact of the matter is that climate change is a natural phenomenon. We have experienced it throughout the history of the world and we will experience it in the future. A small part of that is greenhouse gas emissions, 97% of which are natural, caused by water vapour, volcanic activity and decaying vegetation, and 3% of which is caused by man. One per cent. of that is caused by the United Kingdom—a very small percentage—yet we have changed our economy dramatically. While the Minister has outlined the Government's achievements, she has not pointed out that we pay dearly for energy bills and have fuel poverty, and that we have lost tens of thousands of jobs in energy-intensive industries. At the same time, while we are setting these targets, nature and our competitors are offsetting our draconian actions.

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to know that I disagree with his scientific analysis. The link between CO₂ emissions and temperature increases is proven to an extent well beyond the proof that smoking causes lung cancer. The challenge that he rightly raises, though, is how we act in a way that is just and fair and ensures that we do not put people out of work and that we do not put bills up. The Government go through a process of making sure that our energy-intensive industries are held whole and they do not overpay for their energy. We all supported a price cap Bill to ensure that the cost of energy is held down, but ultimately, this is why when we act, we have to act in a proportionate way and make sure that whoever ends up having to pay for this—whether it is customers, taxpayers or shareholders—is paying a fair and proportionate amount.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Cornwall and the wider south-west have clean growth at the heart of our local and regional industrial strategy. Many innovative businesses will be delivering the solutions that we need to decarbonise, so will the Minister publish the green finance strategy when she publishes her response to the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change, because like her, I think that market forces can be forces for good?

Claire Perry: I will look into that. Cornwall is wonderful for many things and the adoption of clean growth as a fundamental part of a local industrial strategy is incredibly exciting. We want to see other areas doing the same.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), the Minister said she liked local innovation but refused to direct any resources for improving the built environment in local communities, which he was calling for. What resources will local authorities have access to in order to carry out the innovation she is talking about?

Claire Perry: I neglected to mention the £8 million we have put into local energy partnerships. We often find that local authorities have lots of ambition but not necessarily the skills, and we want to make sure they have them and the investment. I also referenced the Salix pot, which is available for many local government buildings, which are also an important part of the built environment.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Solar energy plays a crucial role. Last month, I met the Minister and Moray-based AES Solar, which explained its concerns about the cliff edge the industry was facing because of a change in policy. More than three weeks later, that policy gap still exists. I am sure she accepts the urgency of this issue, so can she tell us when the Government will publish their smart export guarantee policy?

Claire Perry: It will be published as soon as possible. I thank my hon. Friend for that meeting. As he will know, energy companies are voluntarily bringing forward what are in effect smart export guarantee prices, so those price signals are already coming through. As I said, we want to get it right. We do not want to find, as we did with feed-in tariffs, that we have committed more than £30 billion, as we will have done over the lifetime of that scheme, to deliver a relatively small number of installations. We want to future-proof the smart export guarantee and we want to make it stick.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Minister mentioned in her statement that the Government had sought the advice of the Committee on Climate Change on a net zero target. Can she reassure the House that, should this advice entail a greater investment in low-carbon innovation than the £2.5 billion detailed in the clean growth strategy, the Government will commit additional funding as necessary?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman is inviting me to make funding bids to my colleagues in the Treasury. Of course, I would want to make that bid. Innovation funding and co-partnership on innovation is a huge success and one we need in order to drive down costs and drive up deployment.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): None of us can doubt the energy and determination of the Minister to deal with this issue, but could I encourage her to take an hour out of her week to watch the fabulous Channel 4 documentary, "The Street", about the very innovative way Cherwell District Council is allowing people to self-build houses in Bicester? I think she would be as surprised as I was at the way eco credentials become very important when people build their own home. Will she watch this documentary—it's Kevin McCloud, so it won't hurt her—and think more carefully about how to encourage people and local councils to embed eco values when they build?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend points out an incredibly important fact. While people want to do the right thing, they often do not know where to go, and centrally imposed standards often suppress rather than stimulate innovation. Trying to get that right is the subject of a review by other Departments at the moment, but perhaps she could pour me a glass of organic wine and we could watch it together.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I asked the Minister earlier what she would do to incentivise all renewables, and I got a very narrow answer, so let me try again. Small-scale renewables such as solar panels have been fitted in developments in my constituency, such as the social rented housing one in Pollokshields, built by Home Group, but Hannah Smith of Scottish Renewables has said

“that the end of the feed-in tariff will mean, at best, a period of enormous uncertainty for the companies that install these projects and for the people who work for them”.

The solar sector in Scotland has sold the equivalent of 360,000 solar panels every year since 2010. It is no small industry. What will she do to restore certainty and incentivise that industry?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady makes the important point that we need to hurry up with the smart export guarantee and make sure it works to deliver that, but I would gently encourage her to look at the outcome that we are delivering, rather than focusing on a particular technology. Last month, renewable energy in the UK was at over 40%, and we can now source things such as offshore wind at subsidy-free prices, so we are delivering and will continue to deliver, but we need to do that in a way that provides value for money for consumers.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol was the first city in the UK—I think—to declare a climate emergency, so I put on record that Bristol would be more than willing to host the COP talks, if we do win the bid. I can think of nowhere better.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Hear, hear!

Kerry McCarthy: That is a joint bid by my hon. Friend and me!

I want to ask specifically about sustainable development goal 12 on responsible production and consumption. It seems to me that we are using far too many of the world's natural resources producing things we do not actually need just to keep money flowing between buyers and sellers. How can we limit that circle and use our natural resources more wisely?

Claire Perry: As a Nailsea girl, I would naturally be biased in favour of a Bristol bid, but I suspect that there will be a “whole of the UK” bid.

The hon. Lady has made an important point. I think we have made progress with the so-called sustainable economy and will continue to do so, but our continued progress will require Government action alongside action by producers. Again, we are trying to lead by example, but there is clearly much more to do. I must challenge one of the hon. Lady's points: I think that climate change is involved in 15 of the sustainable development goals, which means that it is fundamental to nearly all of them.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister is right to talk about the need for more action at an international level, but can she explain how she intends to use the bid for COP26 to achieve that, and, specifically, will she spell out the more ambitious targets that she thinks the world should embrace?

Claire Perry: Let us try to win the bid first. Other countries are bidding, and I want to ensure that if we do win it, we are able to offer appropriate leadership. Perhaps we can have that conversation in a few months' time.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Mayor of Greater Manchester published his clean air plan. I welcomed that, but we need help from the Government to deliver it. In particular, we need funds for a vehicle scrappage scheme and for retrofitting our bus fleet. What assurance can the Minister give us that funds will be made available to us for those purposes?

Claire Perry: I commend that plan as a good example of the work that can be done to pull through change. We have increased our support for the transition to zero-emission vehicles across the country to more than £1.5 billion, which will fund charging points, some support for buyers, and the transition to clean mass public transport. I would welcome conversations both with the hon. Lady and with colleagues from other Departments. If we are to accelerate this process, we need to do that first in areas where it will make a real difference to air quality.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The nature of this emergency necessitates a national mission-orientated approach, the same sort of vigorous approach that the Americans adopted in the 1960s when they had a national mission to put a man on the moon. That requires the Government to be much more proactive, and much more active, in their approach to bringing forward technologies, de-risking them, and launching them into the wider marketplace in our economy.

A good example of the current failure is in the offshore renewables sector. BiFab yards in Scotland are currently lying idle, with no certainty about their future, because both the UK Government and the Scottish Government are failing to get a grip on the need to allocate a level playing field. Navantia, the Spanish shipbuilder, is currently benefiting from 35% subsidies from the Spanish Government, but this Government are taking no action to level the playing field. We have been ripped off by companies in competitor nations that are stealing our technologies and also undermining our industrial base. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Claire Perry: I understand the BiFab situation, which the hon. Gentleman and I have discussed before, but I must gently correct him. The offshore wind sector deal included a commitment to ensuring that UK content—real content, not just intellectual property content—would rise to 60%, and a commitment to a much better audit process. I am aware of the claims that the hon. Gentleman has made, and we must ensure that there is a level playing field when we are essentially committing taxpayers' money to developing the industry further.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): A letter has been signed by me and by Councillor Tudor Evans, the leader of Plymouth City Council, and co-signed by 65 young people aged from three to 17 who attended the climate strike outside the council's offices. If they were listening to the debate, they would have heard nothing from the Minister about agreeing to declare a climate emergency. Those young people would want me to ask the Minister please to declare a climate emergency and work across parties, so let me ask the Government, on their behalf, to demonstrate that they are listening to them.

Claire Perry: I am sorry if that is the impression that has been given. I cannot say too often that we need actions, not just words. It is the easiest thing in the world to stand up with a document and say, "Look, here is our plan." Unless there are actions that we can deliver, unless we can show those young people that we are prepared to put our money where our mouth is, we should all just pack up and go home. Well, I am not going home. I will continue to campaign on climate change, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will do so as well.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Pupils at Kelvindale primary school in Hillhead, secondary school pupils at the Glasgow Academy and students at Glasgow University have all taken part in the climate protests. They understand the importance of tackling the issue, not just here at home but around the world. Is the Minister committed to the principle of climate justice, and in particular to supporting people in developing countries who are feeling the effects of climate change first and hardest but have done the least to cause it? If the Government support that she has mentioned is being counted in the overseas development assistance target, can she assure us that it is being spent in developing countries rather than subsidising other Government work being done here?

Claire Perry: That is an incredibly important point. In fact, we should be really proud of the way we spend funding. We are trying not only to ensure that we fund adaptation and mitigation, but to invest in projects that help other countries leapfrog some of the things we have done—for example, relying on a coal-based energy system. From Brazil, where we are supporting reforestation, to renewables in Africa, our projects are really making a difference. They are providing employment, they are providing skills and they are ensuring that we have that just transition that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I join others in acknowledging the progress made under successive Governments, but the truth is that, unless the status of emissions reduction is raised in this Government, and the UK's response to climate crisis is driven vigorously from the centre so that all Departments are forced to act, we will continue to fall short. With that in mind, how well prepared does the Minister think the institutions of Government are for the scale and pace of the transition required?

Claire Perry: I think that part of the challenge, but also part of the opportunity, is that this has to be a cross-Government process. We simply cannot sit and make policy around transport emissions without thinking

about infrastructure. We cannot talk about energy without thinking about planning systems. There is therefore absolutely fundamental cross-Government agreement on this, as well as, hopefully, cross-party agreement. It is telling that, when we agreed to put forward our COP bid, which involves a not insubstantial cost, that was done with complete Cabinet unanimity, because everybody recognises the importance of this issue and how fundamentally every part of our economy has to change.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): At the beginning of her statement, the Minister said how good the Climate Change Act 10 years ago was because it put legal obligations on the Government. One of the interesting things Greta Thunberg said earlier today was that we needed to move from the politically possible to the scientifically necessary. The high point of political possibility was reached in Paris, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) pointed out, that is not enough—that is not delivering the goods. When the Minister goes back into the international arena, in Chile at the end of the year, will she think about promoting legal obligations and not just pledges at the international level?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is right that we have to act as well as just setting out these warm words. One of the things we have been doing that is working is encouraging other countries to pass their own climate legislation so that they are not setting interesting, politically attractive targets and then all going off and having lunch. They are actually putting in law the sorts of budgets and reduction trajectories that we have had to enact. That means that Ministers have to stand up and have these uncomfortable grillings in front of people who know a lot more about the subject than they do.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I listened carefully to the Minister's statement, but I was particularly struck by one phrase, which stood out above the others: that we here in the UK should be proud that we "have shown real leadership." I latched on to that phrase because, as the Minister will know, we have no functioning Assembly in Northern Ireland. We also have no Environment Minister in Northern Ireland, nor have we had one since January 2017—for over two years. I need to know—and I am sure my Northern Ireland colleagues also need to know—that there has been real leadership in Northern Ireland in terms of carbon emissions, in the absence of a functioning Assembly. That, of course, must mean that the Minister and her officials have worked closely with the Northern Ireland Department responsible for this issue. Can she offer me that assurance and give me some details of that work?

Claire Perry: Indeed I can offer the hon. Lady that assurance. I have regular ministerial quadrilaterals—in this case with the civil servants, who do an excellent job representing Northern Ireland on many issues, including climate change progress and deal or no-deal planning, so the system is working. Obviously, we would like to see political leadership as well in Northern Ireland, but the process is working, and the market mechanisms that have been put in place are delivering the CO₂ reductions that we want to see.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The right hon. Lady might be sick of hearing me ask the same question over and over again, so I will try to ask it in a

different way. She says that she wants action and not words, and I agree with her, but the two are not mutually exclusive. She comes up with lots of ideas and, as she said, there is a lot in the various documents that she has referred to, so why not have actions and words? Powerful words often lead to much more powerful action. This is an emergency, and today's young people feel a sense of urgency. They need to see leadership coming from within this room, so will the Minister please think again and declare a climate emergency?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady will get the same answer, but she gets points for persistency. I am still waiting for my vegan meal to be delivered to the Houses of Parliament, by the way. The point still stands that it does not matter what we all stand up and say; what matters is that we go out of here and do. I know that she is passionate about this on behalf of her constituents and the country that she is proud to represent, and we are delivering and will continue to deliver. I want to be the Minister who actually commits us to a course of action, not just to a slogan that sounds good on a T-shirt.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right to focus on actions. The Government's own analysis shows that the introduction of E10 would take the equivalent of 1 million vehicles off the road. That is something that could be done now, so will she, as one of her actions, immediately speak to her colleagues in the Department for Transport and get them to accelerate the move to E10?

Claire Perry: Yes.

Northern Ireland Executive

8.51 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I beg to move,

That the Northern Ireland (Extension of Period for Executive Formation) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 616), which were laid before this House on 21 March, be approved.

The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 initially created a five-month breathing space, in which everyone hoped and expected that we would be able to get the Stormont Executive back up and running, and that is what we have all been working towards. The Act also allowed for a one-off further extension of five months, and that is what these regulations would bring about. This is a small and perfectly formed statutory instrument. It runs to all of one side of a page and contains two regulations, one of which deals with citation and commencement. It simply adds another five months of breathing space, opportunity and potential, during which, if we work hard and if all sides are willing, we might be able to reinstate the different sides in Stormont and get the Assembly back up and running.

I do not need to tell anyone here how important this is. In the preceding piece of business, we heard that this area is crying out for a political voice to deal with the devolved issues in Northern Ireland. Everyone on all sides of the community in Northern Ireland, and more broadly, understands the importance of this, and I therefore hope that everyone will back not only the statutory instrument but the efforts from all sides of the community to push everyone towards a willingness to come up with a successful resumption of and conclusion to the talks. As this is a short statutory instrument of only two regulations, I propose to sit down now and leave the floor open to others who might wish to contribute. I hope that everyone will feel able to support the regulations this evening.

8.53 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I think it is appropriate, although not necessarily relevant, to mention the sombre, serious and sober debate on the murder of Lyra McKee that we had earlier. The statements that we heard from the Northern Ireland Members present will resonate long in this House and far beyond it. It makes it all the more important, when we are dealing with business like this—in the absence of an Executive and an Assembly—that we do not allow a vacuum for the gangsters and the men and women of violence to succeed and to flourish. I profoundly hope that what we heard tonight will be a tipping point and that there is a possibility of a return to normalcy, which would be epitomised by this sort of legislation.

This is an extremely unusual piece of legislation in that it has already been made. It comes before us, as the Minister said, small and perfectly formed, but it was perfectly formed last month. It is what we call an affirmative statutory instrument. I am sure that some people lie awake at night dreaming of unusual affirmative statutory instruments, but I do not count myself among those people. This is a piece—*[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, I am being heckled from the Back Benches, but what I do at night is entirely my own business.

[Stephen Pound]

One of the first questions I asked was, “Why was it expedient for this statutory instrument to be made without the prior approval of Parliament?” The answer is quite simply that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was deep in negotiations with the various parties in the Northern Ireland, and it is a tragedy that we have to consider this piece of legislation now after those negotiations have taken place.

The explanatory memorandum refers to negotiations that have taken place with all the Northern Ireland political parties, and I am interested to know whether any negative comments or suggestions were made at that time. I want to put the House’s mind entirely at rest, calm fragile beating hearts and say that Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition will almost certainly not oppose the regulations.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): One way of avoiding this legislation would be for the Secretary of State to put it up to the parties in Northern Ireland. If they wish to go into the Assembly, as they all say they do, the Secretary of State could call the Assembly tomorrow and see who turns up. That would show which parties are the real obstacle to the Assembly forming again.

Stephen Pound: I have known the right hon. Gentleman for many years—I knew him when he was opposing his predecessor in an impressive campaign—but he tempts me down a primrose path that I must sadly resist. I cannot at this stage in my not-particularly-successful parliamentary career claim to speak for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The closest that I have ever come to the Secretary of State is being on the other side of the Dispatch Box, and I am sure that she is quite happy with that—the distance, I mean. I cannot make any comment, but I am familiar with the statement, which the right hon. Gentleman has made before. Labour does not intend to oppose the regulations tonight. In fact, on the contrary, we actually intend to confirm our support. However, we would like some indication of the road map to devolution being restored.

I want to refer to Paul Murphy, now Lord Torfaen, who supported the regulations in the other place. I remember him well, and he is held in great respect. I remember that the late Rev. Dr Ian Paisley would greet him every morning with the salutation, “And how is the apostle Paul this morning?” Paul Murphy loves Northern Ireland, but he said in his speech in the upper House that

“Northern Ireland is the least democratic part of our country and of the European Union. No nationalist Members of Parliament, or, for that matter, Members of this House, take their seats”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 10 April 2019; Vol. 797, c. 519.]

and “there is no Assembly”. Tonight, we realise the full impact of that situation, which cannot be allowed to pertain.

There has been some talk of the discussions being accelerated by the appointment of an independent arbiter—someone to oversee them. It is a superficially attractive proposition, but I understand that the Secretary of State is currently in discussions with two committees of Members of the Legislative Assembly, and we would like to see how that progresses.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman have any idea of what is going to happen after the August date expires? What we are being asked to support tonight takes us to August, and he knows how quickly July will pass with the marching season. Does he have any idea of the plan post August?

Stephen Pound: I did ask the Minister earlier for some indication of the road map, but all I can say is that if the Secretary of State or the Minister, let alone myself or my colleague the shadow Secretary of State, had the remotest idea of where we will be in two or three months, we would be buying lottery tickets, not sitting here tonight. With respect, I have to say that I do not know. All I know is that we have to show willing, determination, energy and absolute commitment, because we cannot carry on with a situation in which such legislation is taken through the House in the absence of those who should be dealing with it. This is Northern Ireland business, and it should be dealt with by Northern Ireland legislators in Northern Ireland. I hope every single one of us accepts that.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Pound: Of course I will. I could hardly refuse.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I am sure he will not regret taking my intervention. Having listened to what he has just said, I am curious to know whether, in fact, Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition—we often hear them described as the “loyal Opposition”—would support the Secretary of State if she were to exercise her power to call a Northern Ireland Assembly election in the event that the parties do not come to any agreement before the expiry date in August. Would the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues support the Secretary of State in that event?

Stephen Pound: Once again, I am tempted by the spirit of hypothesis. I cannot imagine that situation at the present time, and it is not really appropriate at this stage even to hypothesise along those lines. I am perfectly prepared to discuss these things in the silent, tenebrous gloom of the Tea Room, but we should not be making such suggestions and prognostications on the Floor of the House.

I finish by saying that we support the regulations and will not be voting against them. We understand that the Secretary of State is doing her best on this. Obviously, like everyone in the House, I wanted to do more, and I think she wanted to do more—I think every one of us feels that way. It is with sadness that we support the regulations tonight, but we understand they are absolutely necessary. This is the first piece of made legislation I have seen come before the House in this way, and I profoundly hope it will be the last and that there will be less and less Northern Ireland business taken on the Floor of the House. Let it be repatriated to Northern Ireland, where it belongs. We support the regulations.

9.1 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I share the weariness of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) about our continuing necessity

to debate Northern Ireland business on the Floor of the House, and I hope very much that, before too long, we will see democracy in Northern Ireland restored to where it should be: Stormont.

However, we have to contemplate the possibility that that day may be some time off. I share the desire already expressed for some form of road map, some sense of when it may be necessary to bring powers back to Whitehall to make sure that Northern Ireland is properly governed, because there can be little doubt—my Select Committee has certainly taken evidence to this effect—that the good governance of Northern Ireland is suffering big time right now. Decisions that should be made in the interest of the ordinary lived experience of people in Northern Ireland are not being made because of the absence of ministerial decision making.

That situation is sustainable for a while but not for too long, and it has become increasingly clear to us that public services are suffering, that decisions are not being made and that infrastructure is not being put in place. Civil servants, who are trying to do their best, clearly have their limitations. That has been proved in the courts, despite the guidance issued by the Secretary of State, and there will come a time when Ministers here in London will have to start making those decisions with a heavy heart. It probably is not acceptable to kick this particular can too much further down the road.

I share the temptation, expressed by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), to think about calling the Assembly to see who turns up, but he knows as well as I do that that recall would be very short-lived indeed because of the need for cross-community consent.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The recall may well be short-lived, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that one significant advantage is that reconvening the Assembly would prove, beyond any doubt, who are the willing and who are the unwilling?

Dr Murrison: That's as may be, but the hon. Gentleman will have gathered from my preamble that I am interested in ministerial decision making, and I rather suspect that very few decisions would be made by Ministers in the short space of time between the convening of the Assembly and it breaking down. Under the legislation, it certainly would not have legitimacy.

Sammy Wilson: I can understand the hon. Gentleman's cynicism and caution in all of this, but as Sinn Féin, which I assume he was referring to, has publicly made it clear that it does not object to going back into the Assembly, does he not think this would at least be a useful exercise to test the sincerity of Sinn Féin spokesmen, who almost daily are now saying that they wish to go back into the Assembly? If the doors were opened and the Secretary of State invited all the parties, we would see whether or not those assurances, which are given with a straight face on the TV almost every night, are sincere.

Dr Murrison: I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman has his own views on the sincerity of the party to which he refers, but the preoccupation of the Secretary of State is the good governance of Northern Ireland. In that respect, I suspect we would not be moved much further on were we to recall the Assembly and see who turns up.

The date of 25 August is interesting. As has been said, not much is likely to happen between now and then, particularly given the marching season. What happens on 25 August? It seems to me that there could be a throwing of the electoral dice in order to work out a way forward because something might turn up; the numbers may change and it may be possible to form an Executive. The sense is that that would not happen.

We are then of course faced with another important date: 31 October 2019, the latest in the deadlines for this Brexit journey. One thing has been made clear in terms of the chronology: in the event of a no-deal Brexit, there would have to be some form of direct rule from Westminster. That is the only certainty we have been given by Ministers. I would like to know from the Minister, therefore, whether it is his working assumption that, on 25 August, an election would be called in very short order, because that would give a small window between then and 31 October in which to hold elections and perhaps have a slightly different outcome from the one we have at the moment—that may just be crucial.

That is pretty much all I have to say. As the Minister has said, this is a short measure and it is unobjectionable. Like most right hon. and hon. Members, I cannot wait to get on to discuss seed potatoes, which is the second matter of Northern Ireland business we will be debating this evening.

9.7 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is very much like groundhog day when it comes to Northern Ireland legislation, albeit secondary legislation in this case. I could set out the many reasons why it is imperative that the Executive be re-formed. The Minister would largely agree with that aim but disagree as to the UK Government's role and leadership in achieving that thus far. I hope that the real depth of feeling exhibited in Northern Ireland in recent days, following Lyra McKee's sad death, and the Secretary of State's conversations in the coming days with party leaders will mark a real shift in the political situation, because we are in danger of slipping into a reality where functioning devolution in Northern Ireland is no longer the norm. Although much of the fault ultimately falls on its own representatives, it is far beyond time that the UK Government began a new round of inclusive talks in earnest, in order that they be the arbiter that is required to end this impasse. I reiterate that, if the Government cannot do this, they should consider bringing in independent arbitration.

The murder of Lyra McKee last week has demonstrated to all of us across these islands just how fragile and precious the peace process in Northern Ireland is and always has been. Following her murder, the public and political reaction has been united in sending two very clear messages. The first is a condemnation of those who carried out the killing. The second is a determination that politics, and nothing else, must fill the dangerous political vacuum that has been allowed to develop. So we will not be opposing this SI tonight, but I have a few questions for the Minister to address in his summing up.

Ian Paisley: I understand that the hon. Gentleman does not wish to oppose the motion, but will he stand in our shoes and think about something? If Parliament

[*Ian Paisley*]

were talking about his part of the kingdom—his part of Scotland—he would oppose the motion tonight, would he not?

Gavin Newlands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question and understand where it comes from. It is of great regret that we have to consider this SI at all. It is not comfortable for me to address situations in another part of the United Kingdom that should be devolved. There should be elected representatives in Northern Ireland, but—I hate this phrase—we are where we are. We have to ensure that the regulations are passed this evening, so we will not oppose them.

On Monday, the leaders of the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Ulster Unionist party and the Alliance party called on the Secretary of State to reconvene inclusive talks on power sharing this week. We in the SNP have been calling for such urgent talks at every turn. The Secretary of State has said that the restoration of devolution is her top priority, so will the Minister respond to the public and political calls to convene talks urgently? They should be proper talks, not just brief conversations between the Secretary of State and the party leaders. Why must there be such delay? I see no reason why talks should be dragged out beyond the local and European elections. The people of Northern Ireland deserved a functioning Assembly three years ago, and they deserve one now, not at some arbitrary future date. Can the Minister explain the justification for this—is the extension a deliberate attempt to stall the reconvening of talks until September?

In previous debates, Members from all parties have outlined concerns that the Northern Irish civil service has been stretched to its limit. Will the Minister update the House on the administrative pressures that the Northern Irish civil service is experiencing because of the absence of political direction? Given the vacuum in Northern Ireland, why has the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference not met more regularly? What meetings are planned for the immediate future?

In conclusion, the SNP wants Northern Ireland to benefit from a fully functioning Executive and Assembly. That is in the interests of Northern Ireland, Scotland, the UK and, indeed, Europe. The continued absence of power sharing can no longer be tolerated. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better from all its elected representatives and its Government.

9.12 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is now more than two years since there was an Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland, which now has the proud achievement of holding the world record for the longest time a country has gone without a Government. We members of the Select Committee have heard about the difficulties that has caused. We have listened to the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland tell us about the daily struggles and not knowing whether he has enough money in his budgets to pay his officers, to order equipment or to make sure that the vital work that the PSNI needs to do can be done.

The Select Committee has listened to headteachers across all communities tell us about not only the school funding issues they face but the political reforms that

need to happen to enable schools in Northern Ireland to teach the next generation of children. The Salisbury review that was commissioned when the Northern Ireland Assembly was sitting is now gathering dust on tables because there is no one there to take the decisions forward. Northern Ireland potentially faces a teachers' strike because teachers there have not had a pay rise since the Assembly fell and are now being paid 6.6% less than teachers in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Civil servants from various Northern Ireland Departments have told the Select Committee that they are doing their best to keep things going but cannot take the key political decisions that need to be taken by Ministers. The Department of Health's suicide strategy could be saving lives as we speak, but is still on hold, and there is still no legislation on mental capacity in Northern Ireland, even though not only did the rest of the United Kingdom have the original Mental Capacity Act 2005, but the House passed the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill only a few weeks ago.

The MLAs who come before the Select Committee tell us there is no way there is going to be an Assembly any time soon. It is indeed depressing. Although extension after extension seems to be in vogue in this place on a variety of issues, we cannot carry on like that in Northern Ireland—we cannot carry on representing all the communities of the wonderful Northern Ireland in that way. It is ironic that on 22 April 1969, almost 50 years ago to the day, Bernadette Devlin stood in this place to give her maiden speech. It was a controversial maiden speech from a controversial Member of Parliament who, I am sure, would be no fan of me or of Members of the Democratic Unionist party. She stood as a Unity candidate and as a civil rights activist, campaigning for one man, one vote for all communities in Northern Ireland. How sad it is that 50 years later, when everyone in Northern Ireland has the right to vote, there are some communities that do not have representation either in this place or in the Assembly.

None the less, so much has been achieved in Northern Ireland. Despite the terrible incidents over the holiday weekend, we finally have peace. My concern is that, without an Assembly, a vacuum is being created, which paramilitary organisations on all sides are starting to fill. Those organisations are starting to indoctrinate young people who were not around at the time of the Good Friday agreement. Those young people do not have anyone speaking up for them, whether it is on health, education or crime. The vacuum is being filled by people who do not have the best interests of Northern Ireland at heart.

I really would like the Minister to outline what will happen in August if no Assembly has been formed. Will we see another election? Will we have an Assembly of the willing, or will we have an independent chair of talks to get things going? We need to have those answers this evening before we decide on the motion before us.

Northern Ireland is a wonderful place, notwithstanding what we have heard today both in the statement and in the motion before us. Despite not having an Assembly, Northern Ireland has the best performing education system for primary maths in Europe. Belfast is the world's top destination for FinTech development. Northern Ireland has the highest availability of broadband in the United Kingdom, something that I am personally very envious of, because in Lewes we have multiple notspots so any advice that can be given to East Sussex would be

very welcome. There are also beautiful coastlines in Northern Ireland; I visited the Giant's Causeway over Christmas. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) was very generous in recommending hospitality in his constituency.

There is so much good news that comes out of Northern Ireland and so many wonderful people—whether they identify as British or Irish, Protestant or Catholic, of any faith or none, or as nationalist or Unionist, they are the most friendly, hard-working people one could ever wish to meet. Although there are tough decisions to be made, I urge all sides to get back around the table and form an Assembly and an Executive as soon as possible. There are some great stories to tell about Northern Ireland. Without an Assembly, we are missing some of the good news as well as the bad.

9.17 pm

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) who has spoken very eloquently about the attractions of Northern Ireland. She is right to point out, as we consider the dark news of the weekend's events, the many tremendous assets that Northern Ireland has going for it, which include, most of all, its people despite everything that has happened in recent days. We have seen the worst of what can happen in Northern Ireland, but we have also seen the very best, with people coming together in a very, very strong way to send a powerful message about the future that we all want for our beloved country. Although we may have our disagreements—our strong disagreements—we all hail from Northern Ireland. We were born there, we live there, and our families grew up there. Our grandchildren, those of us who have them—I am blessed to have two young grandchildren—will live their lives there, and we want to see the very best for them. We are united in that great hope of wanting to see the very best for the future of our country.

Part of the sad fact of what we have to deal with is not just the human tragedy, which we spoke about earlier, and the terrible events in Londonderry, but the fact that we do not have a functioning political Assembly or a functioning Government in Northern Ireland. That is deeply regrettable. I remember the evening when Martin McGuinness came and told Arlene Foster, me and a number of our aides that he was going to resign. Even at that stage, we urged him to think again. We said to him, "If you collapse everything, it will be much, much harder to build it up again." It was throwing away 10 years of progress over something that, by comparison with all that we have been through in Northern Ireland and have overcome, was a comparatively minor issue—important, but not the sort of issue that we had dealt with previously and had overcome. We urged him to think again, but Sinn Féin was determined to take this course of action. In the full knowledge of what might be at stake, it plunged Northern Ireland into a needless election. We have all seen what unnecessary elections sometimes bring about: very much unintended consequences. These elections have outcomes. Martin McGuinness called that election; Sinn Féin effectively called that election in the belief that it would strengthen its position and things would carry on with it in a more important, dominant position. Of course, it did not work out that way.

We are where we are, and this statutory instrument is a necessary one. Of course, we will not oppose it, but we do not believe that it is at all satisfactory in terms of the government of Northern Ireland. Quite frankly, we cannot go on like this for much longer, and I think the Secretary of State knows that. Indeed, the House needs to be reminded that when the Conservative party manifesto was written in 2017, the Government said that they wanted to

"avoid any return to direct rule, but in the continued absence of a functioning devolved administration, a Conservative government will do all that is necessary to provide the good governance and political stability that Northern Ireland needs, including political decision-making from Westminster".

That was in the Conservative party manifesto in 2017, and it bears repeating today because what we are being offered in Northern Ireland is the worst form of government that can possibly be imagined anywhere in a modern, civilised, developed, democratic country.

The people who are running the Government in Northern Ireland are effectively senior civil servants. David Sterling, the head of the civil service, made it clear on 23 March last year that it was totally and utterly unacceptable for senior civil servants to be put in this position. Not only is this SI—and the primary legislation that underpins it and give it its locus—wrong in principle by having Northern Ireland governed in this way; it is also a flagrant breach of the Conservative party manifesto, on which this Government stood and on which they are supposed to be proceeding.

Dr Murrison: I do not disagree with anything that the right hon. Gentleman has said, but he himself said that when the institutions collapsed, he pointed out to the late Martin McGuinness how difficult it would be to rebuild them. Is it not also the case that it would be less likely that the institutions would be capable of being re-established were powers to be brought back to Westminster?

Nigel Dodds: We are now two years into this limboland, which is utterly unacceptable in its own terms, but it is not correct to suggest that this is having the effect of bringing about the restoration of devolution. The people of Northern Ireland deserve proper government, with accountable decisions being made. These are normal, democratic, basic fundamental rights.

Let me give the House a couple of examples. We were talking earlier about violence and paramilitarism in Northern Ireland—about the still pernicious role of paramilitaries on both sides of the community in Northern Ireland. I have experience of that in my constituency of Belfast North, on the loyalist side as well as the republican side. The head of the Organised Crime Task Force says that not having Ministers taking decisions is hampering its pursuit of paramilitary and criminal assets. The unexplained wealth orders, whereby people are forced to provide evidence as to how they have gained their wealth, cannot be implemented in Northern Ireland. These are common-sense measures that would empower the security forces and the agencies of the Government to tackle criminality and paramilitarism in Northern Ireland, but they are simply left to wither on the vine. That is utterly unacceptable. These things are now well past the time when they need to be brought into force, and that has to be done, one way or another, through Ministers.

[Nigel Dodds]

The Chairman of the Select Committee referred to the impact of Brexit. I have heard the argument that if we leave the European Union, direct rule will have to be implemented in Northern Ireland. I have read reports that apparently this has been considered such a terrible prospect that the UK should remain in the European Union for as long as it takes to avoid direct rule in Northern Ireland. I point out to the House that we had periods—considerable periods—of direct rule after the 2003 Assembly elections when Sinn Féin refused to decommission its weapons. It was in government but it was still murdering people on the streets through the direct action against drugs, I think it was called. It was still holding on to its arms; it had not decommissioned them. So the Government of the day—a Labour Government—had to introduce direct rule in order to deal with the matter. Of course, people accepted that there had to be proper governance. It was not permanent; it was interim. It was not intended to last for ever. It was designed to give some semblance of good governance to Northern Ireland while these issues were resolved.

Arlene Foster, our party leader, has made it clear that she is prepared to form the Executive in Northern Ireland tomorrow, along with the other parties entitled to seats in the Executive, if the Assembly is called. I would agree with what Members have said in the House tonight about calling the Assembly. Let us see who is willing to go into government and who is not. Let us test it with people who talk about wanting to get government in Northern Ireland. Arlene Foster made an offer last year in which she said, “Let’s get the Assembly up and going, to deal with the issues that need to be dealt with—health, education, schools, the environment, roads, infrastructure—and let’s talk about the other issues”, which had suddenly become evident after the elections were called, “in parallel.”

In case anyone thinks that this is an open-ended process designed to lure Sinn Féin into the Executive and the Assembly without any kind of finality or prospect of getting agreement on these issues, we can time-limit it and say, “Well, the Assembly will fall again if we do not get these matters resolved.” That was dismissed within 30 minutes of the offer being made. This week we heard what Sinn Féin’s position was. This was said on Easter Sunday by Mary Lou McDonald: “Let us have a British-Irish partnership—a joint authority between the Irish Government and the British Government—to get things implemented, and then call the Assembly.” Let us be clear in this House tonight about what is happening in terms of the willingness of parties to enter government.

People have talked about what will happen on 25 August. The Secretary of State is clear that under this SI she will be under an obligation to call elections, but then she was under an obligation to call elections in 2017, when nearly a whole year went by and then we introduced retrospective legislation to extend the date to March 2019. So let us not get too excited about what might happen on 25 August. One thing that should certainly happen by then is that good governance should be returned to Northern Ireland in one shape or form.

I am intrigued that the explanatory memorandum, which was prepared by the Northern Ireland Office, says in paragraph 12:

“There is no, or no significant, impact on business, charities or voluntary bodies.

There is no, or no significant, impact on the public sector.

An Impact Assessment has not been prepared for this instrument because there is no, or no significant, impact on business, charities, voluntary bodies or the public sector.”

How can the Northern Ireland Office seriously suggest that there is no impact on business, charities or voluntary bodies? There is a massive impact in Northern Ireland every single day as a result of the failure to do not only what is right but what the Conservative party promised to do in its manifesto.

9.30 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I am reluctant to see this legislation come forward. Like all my colleagues, I have been out on the doorsteps in my constituency over the last few days and most of the Easter period. I have been in Lisburn, Moira, Hillsborough and Dromore, talking to people about politics in the local government elections and supporting our DUP candidates. At door after door, the message has been clear: “When are we getting Stormont back? When will we have a functioning Assembly and Executive?” At one level, I am encouraged by that, because it clearly demonstrates that the people of Northern Ireland have taken ownership of the devolved institutions, flawed though they may be and difficult though they are to operate. There is no doubt that a strong majority of people in Northern Ireland recognise that governance in Northern Ireland on the day-to-day issues—the bread and butter issues—is best done by local politicians in the Assembly and the Executive. I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister of State agree with that.

That is not to say that when we had direct rule in the past, we did not have a form of government that functioned in Northern Ireland. It was not the preferred form, but I echo the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds); I disagree that direct rule is somehow undesirable or undemocratic. When I was first elected as a Member of Parliament, Northern Ireland was under direct rule. As my right hon. Friend said, even since the 1998 agreement, we have had periods of direct rule, and government is provided.

At the moment, like all my right hon. and hon. Friends, I am frustrated, because I encounter on a daily basis issues on which decisions need to be taken at ministerial level and are not being taken. The people I represent are being affected in terms of healthcare provision, education funding and a multiplicity of other areas. Justice is another such area—appointments need to be made but cannot, and decisions are required but cannot be taken, and it is having an impact on the people whom my party and I represent. My right hon. Friend is right to point out that there is an impact. We cannot say, as the explanatory memorandum suggests, that there is no discernible impact, because there is.

I thank the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) for her comments. Despite all this, Northern Ireland is doing well. I am tired of listening to some political commentators who have never done politics talking Northern Ireland down all the time, despite the fact that we have the lowest unemployment we have had for years, that we are still attracting investment and creating jobs and that we have more visitors coming to Northern Ireland than we have for decades. There is a lot of positivity, but we need a functioning Government at Stormont.

Lady Hermon: I am quite sure the right hon. Gentleman will agree with me when I say, as we watched the leaders of the political parties in Northern Ireland such as the Alliance party, the DUP and Sinn Féin coming to the Creggan at the weekend after Lyra McKee's murder—and it was murder: it was not an accident; it was murder—that there was an expectation throughout the community that she would not have died in vain, and she cannot be allowed to have died in vain. The people of Northern Ireland would love to see—I am speaking as an independent Member, but I reflect this to the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues—a genuine, sincere coming together of the political leaders of all the parties in Northern Ireland to get our Assembly back again, which would be a wonderful memorial to Lyra.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I am absolutely happy to reassure the hon. Lady that if the Secretary of State were to convene the Assembly on Thursday, the day after the funeral of Lyra McKee, the Democratic Unionist party from its leader down would be there, and all our MLAs would be there and ready to take up office and to get on with the job of providing good government for Northern Ireland. I say that to the hon. Lady without any preconditions whatsoever.

We are ready to do the job; this party is ready to act; and I long for the day when we see local Ministers back in Stormont again. However, that does require leadership, and when I consider the issues that need to be dealt with, they pale into insignificance compared with the issues that we have dealt with in the past. As I have often said, the mountains in front of us are no higher than the mountains we have already climbed in Northern Ireland. Yes, I agree with the hon. Lady that the best and strongest message we can send—to that masked gunman in the Creggan, to those who cheered him on and to those who walk the streets of Dublin in their paramilitary garb, wanting to drag us back to the dark days of the past—is to get Stormont back up and running. That is absolutely the case, and it is echoed in the *Belfast Telegraph* editorial this very day.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), the parliamentary leader of our party, has said, as our party leader said in the Creggan and as we as a party say in unison on these Benches today, we are ready to govern and we are ready to take our places in the Assembly and Executive. We do not want what has been brought before the House this evening; we want to get on with the job and sort out the issues, as we provide good government for Northern Ireland. I hope that day will come before we reach the expiry date in this. Let us not operate on the basis that that is a target date. Let us operate on the basis that we need government back in Northern Ireland tomorrow. The sooner we get it, the better for all the people of Northern Ireland, and we renew our commitment to do that.

9.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am very pleased to speak in this debate and to follow my colleagues, who have made some very good contributions. I believe we cannot continue to do what we have been doing for the past six months, because here we are, asking for yet another extension—an extension to the indecision, an extension to the miry clay, an extension to the freeze on

moving forward, an extension to the cessation of legislation, an extension to the absolute power of unelected civil servants and an extension to the misery of the people of Northern Ireland, who are crying out for leadership, for a working Government and for their appointed—I say that very respectfully—Secretary of State to start making decisions.

Yesterday, I had the privilege and the honour to walk with the Apprentice Boys of Derry in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and we had what I would refer to as a cultural extravaganza. Somewhere in the region of 10,000 people walked and were watching the parade, and there was not one bit of bother. Compare that with the balaclava-ed, military-uniformed marching in parts of Northern Ireland and in Dublin—my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) mentioned that—with complete disregard for the other cultures across the Province, and it is understandable that we get annoyed.

We cannot ignore the issues that are brought to us on the doorsteps. I made it my business, during the time I was off, to be on the doors with my local councillors who worked for me in previous Assembly elections and in Westminster elections. I wanted to return that accolade and support them, and I will continue to do so this week. To be fair, my hon. Friends have done likewise. I say with the greatest respect that the key issue raised with us on the doors is not the Irish language. The key issues for the people I speak to are quite simple: education, health, roads, farming and fishing. Those are the things that the people of my constituency want, so you will understand, Madam Deputy Speaker, why we get ourselves a bit annoyed with Sinn Féin's intransigence.

The agri-food sector in my constituency contributes greatly to jobs, with more than 2,000-odd in the factories and probably double or triple that on the farms and in the businesses that feed into the process. We cannot ignore the issues of that sector. Because we do not have a working Assembly, opportunities are being held up for those in the sector who want to apply for grants to extend their factories.

I understand that time is of the essence, so I want quickly to give two examples of things that have happened to me in my constituency office over the past two weeks that explain why people are frustrated. While I am saying this, I am aware that I will be trotting through the Lobby with the Secretary of State because we have no option other than to extend the provisions, accept continual stalemate, and sit and watch our people crying out for action to be taken.

Picture this: a young teacher has a baby on 1 July. The baby is four weeks premature, with the little issues that come from that. In England, the child's parents would be allowed, in co-operation with the health visitor, to hold back the little one for another year so that he was not so far behind. The mother, who just happens to be a teacher, would be able to use her expertise to say, "My son is not far enough caught up, so we will let him do a year in nursery." That would not be an issue on the UK mainland.

The Northern Ireland Assembly began the legislation process to enable informed parental consent to play a part in the education of premature babies in Northern Ireland as well, but because Sinn Féin has pulled out and consistently been allowed to hold the entire country—

[*Jim Shannon*]

every other person in Northern Ireland—to ransom, this mother, who, as a teacher, understands her son's educational needs, must sit idly by and watch a massive schooling mistake being made, without being able to do anything about it. That is not okay. Will the Minister of State come with me to that lady's door and take the time to explain to her how his inability to make this hard decision will impact on her child's experience in school? Will he or the Secretary of State do that? I say to them: "Be ready for a roasting when you get to the doorstep."

Will the Secretary of State come to the Ulster Hospital and explain to a family why the desire to placate a republican agenda means that their grandmother must lie in a corridor in the Ulster Hospital for 36 hours before she is seen? I say to the Secretary of State with the greatest respect that she was happy to make the trip to Northern Ireland to court businesses for the remain agenda, but nothing has publicly been done, as far as I can see, to make things better in the Ulster Hospital, and my constituents cannot see things getting any better.

Will the Secretary of State, the Minister of State or whoever has the time to do so explain to the people of the Province the justification for this placation of republican terrorism, which has not kept peace intact but has seen the murder of an innocent bystander, Lyra McKee, despite her appeasement of that community? Sinn Féin obviously have no control over dissident republicans in Londonderry or anywhere else.

Will the Secretary of State or the Minister of State do what we need them to do and take control? Will the Secretary of State determine to have her legal advisers find a way to hold a democratic election and allow those who will take their seats with no red lines whatsoever to do so, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), the DUP's leader in Westminster, has said? Will she freeze out those who hold us to ransom and stop decisions being made? People are dying needlessly in our health service due to the lack of decisions. Some of my constituents have been waiting for over two years for operations. I have to say this, Madam Deputy Speaker: some have waited but have never had their operation, because they have passed on in that time.

Will the Secretary of State determine that Northern Ireland is not to be held hostage, and that only those willing to work with other democratically elected Members with no conditions are allowed to stand? It is time we think outside the box. It is time we did something different. It is time we urged our Secretary of State and her Minister of State, who is here to answer the debate, to do just that. I fear that I already know the answer, but please prove me wrong. I will vote for the extension—I will support it, because I must—but for the sake of my people in Strangford and the people of Northern Ireland, please do something to help my nation.

9.45 pm

John Penrose: I am delighted that everybody accepts, with a degree of reluctance and frustration, that the statutory instrument, while not wanted, is necessary. I thank everybody for saying, albeit with a heavy heart—I think that goes for all of us—that they will support it. I appreciate and recognise the degree of cross-party support. It is more powerful because it is cross-party.

That is not say that the frustrations are not real, or that those frustrations have not been clearly and effectively expressed this evening. We have heard a whole litany of examples, from all sides of the House, from the lengthening list of decisions not being taken because Stormont is not currently operational. We have heard examples from all sorts of people. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who just spoke, gave the examples of a lady with a premature baby and a grandmother left waiting on a hospital trolley for too long. There were other examples. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) gave a long list of missed opportunities, as did the Select Committee Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). The repeated refrain from all sides is that we cannot keep on, in the Chair's phrase, kicking the can down the road. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) said that the mountains in front of us are no higher than those we have scaled in the past, but he also said that bread and butter issues are far better done by locally elected politicians in Stormont.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): In light of recent legislation relating to the Buick case and permanent secretaries needing cover to allow them to make decisions, permanent secretaries are still not signing off non-controversial decisions. They are using the frustration of no Assembly as an excuse not to do business.

John Penrose: I am sure everybody here would appreciate that the senior civil servants in the Northern Ireland civil service are faced with a very, very difficult position. They are being required to keep the wheels of good government turning. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 equips them to do that, but clearly they have to be extremely careful not to take new policy decisions which should rightly and constitutionally be taken by elected politicians in Stormont. That would clearly be wrong and outwith the powers in the 2018 Act.

That perhaps answers the question asked by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) about the stresses on the Administration. The answer is simply that: people are being asked to operate up to the limits of what they can decently and constitutionally do. It requires a great deal of care and civil service professionalism to ensure they go up to those limits but no further. I do not think we can reasonably ask them to continue doing that for any great deal of time longer, not least because, as people have been rightly pointing out, the list of problems left unsolved because they require a political decision is getting longer every day.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Just to re-emphasise the point that my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) made, I understand the caution in the Minister's response and the balance that senior civil servants have to reach in the public interest. There is a matrix in the Act for how those decisions should be made, but the truth is that some permanent secretaries and Departments are more willing to use the powers afforded to them under the Act than others. There needs to be a fair appreciation of that and an encouragement to the head of the civil service to say that for as long as the Act pertains, for as long as we do not have active devolved institutions, and for as long as

there is a democratic deficit and decisions can be made, they should be made. I encourage him to meet us to go through that in finer detail, because some permanent secretaries are using it to its full force. Others are not and they should be encouraged to do so.

John Penrose: I share the frustration on both sides about this issue. We need to be extremely careful. It may be clear to one person on one side of the House, or to another person on the other side, that a particular Department in the Northern Ireland civil service is acting to the full extent of its powers or perhaps drawing back a little further from using those full powers, but the point is that at some stage, that becomes a political judgment rather than a professional civil service judgment. When it becomes a political judgment, the answer at that point, of course—as many people on both sides of the debate have rightly said so far this evening—is for there to be an Executive at Stormont and for the devolved Assembly to come back into play. Ultimately, until that happens, the judgment of the civil servants has to be just that—within the scope of the Act. It is very hard for politicians to say that this civil servant is doing a good job and that civil servant is doing a bad job unless we get the politicians in place in Stormont who have the natural legal locus and the democratic mandate to do so.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Although the Minister has stated that this could become a political judgment in terms of civil servants, the reality is that the law is there. There are parameters around the exercise of the powers given within that legislation. We would like to see consistency in the discretion that each of the permanent secretaries or senior civil servants has. I asked the Secretary of State on a previous occasion to consider looking at guidance being issued to permanent secretaries to get that type of consistency. What all of us are finding at the moment is that there is a disparity in the way that permanent secretaries and civil servants are operating the powers that they have been given objectively in the Act.

John Penrose: I accept that there will be different views about whether some Departments are using those powers to their full extent and others are not. To coin the phrase used by the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who spoke for the Labour party, we are being asked to tread down a primrose path in saying that this particular part of the Northern Ireland civil service is using those powers to its full extent and this one is not. Ultimately, this has to be something that is decided, led and ultimately arbitrated by the devolved Assembly and devolved Ministers. All of us feel this frustration, but it is becoming a rather circular argument if we say that we should be trying to push them one way or the other. We have to set those rules, but ultimately, if people are not happy with the way that they are being applied, provided that they are being used within the rules of the law that we have set in the EFEF Act it is then up to the Northern Ireland Assembly. I am afraid that it is as fundamental, as simple and as difficult a truth as that. The only answer is for the Northern Ireland Assembly to come back.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister has said a number of times that he shares the frustration of what my colleagues have said tonight, but why will

the Government not go ahead and call the Assembly? Those who turn up can get it moving and working for the people of Northern Ireland—why will the Government not do that?

John Penrose: I bring the hon. Gentleman good news. My colleague the Secretary of State has many, many talents and powers but one of them is not to “call the Assembly”, to use this sort of portentous phrase, which a number of us have been using so far this evening. In fact, the Assembly is still legally in existence. If MLAs want to turn up tomorrow, or perhaps the day after tomorrow, given the sad and tragic events that are happening tomorrow, nobody needs to call them to do so. They have a legal right to turn up, open the doors and do so. When they do turn up, they will be entitled to select a Speaker and then choose a First Minister and Deputy First Minister. It does not require the Secretary of State to call them. We have heard several calls this evening for a trial to see whether people would turn up and do that. If MLAs from any side of the community and from any political party are so minded, they can do that. I will leave it up to them, of course, as directly locally elected politicians, to decide if they wish to do that, but they are legally entitled to do so.

I do not want to detain the House any longer. I am conscious of the passage of time.

Nigel Dodds *rose—*

John Penrose: I will give way very briefly and then try to answer one more question before sitting down.

Nigel Dodds: I admire the Minister greatly. He is doing a valiant job with the only two regulations in the SI, which he mentioned, so I understand that he does not have a lot of material, but he is trying to put everything on to other people, saying it is up to the parties to call the Assembly and so on. Does he not take any responsibility for the state of affairs in Northern Ireland, which his Government are responsible for, in breach of their own manifesto commitments? Will he not answer that point?

John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman leads me on to my next point, which is a response to the several people who asked for a road map. Clearly, it will depend on the actions of the individual parties, but one of the things the Government are responsible for, which we have been trying to do and will continue to try to do, is to get the talks to bring Stormont back together again started, get them continued and get them successfully concluded.

Several people asked about the road map. As the Secretary of State set out to the House on 21 March, she has spoken to the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government several times in recent weeks. In those discussions, all the parties have been consistent in their commitment to restoring a power-sharing executive and the other political institutions set out in the Belfast agreement. We believe that the five main parties are in favour of a short and focused set of roundtable talks to restore devolution at the earliest opportunity, and the Irish Government also support this approach. Any such talks process would involve the UK Government, the five main parties and the Irish Government and would take place in full accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach.

[John Penrose]

During the statement earlier, several people said, without wishing to prejudge or anticipate anything with the funeral of Lyra McKee due to take place tomorrow, that there might just be a glimmer of light—a change of view and tone in Northern Ireland—which is tremendously important. If it is the case, this kind of approach will be necessary. I completely accept what the right hon. Gentleman said. We need to convene those talks, if we possibly can, and thereby create the breathing space in which that change of tone and approach can flourish and develop.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind) *rose*—

John Penrose: I was about to sit down. I have one minute, but then I really must conclude.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to take his one minute. Earlier this evening, no one in the Chamber could have been unmoved by the dignified and moving tribute the Secretary of State paid to Lyra McKee. How will she and the Northern Ireland Office translate that tribute into tangible change in Northern Ireland? People have a right to know. We want change in the Northern Ireland—led by the Secretary of State.

John Penrose: I think I just set out the next steps. Clearly, it will then be for the people involved in the talks to bring them to fruition. They have to be led and convened by the Government, but they will require everybody else's involvement too. I have laid out what the process will be. I agree that no one could have failed to be moved. There is an opportunity here, and we must grasp it if we can. The SI creates the moment—that breathing space—that might allow it to happen. I hope that everybody will grasp the opportunity thus created with both hands.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Northern Ireland (Extension of Period for Executive Formation) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 616), which were laid before this House on 21 March, be approved.

Exiting the European Union (Agriculture)

10 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I beg to move,

That the draft Animal Health, Seed Potatoes and Food (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 3 April, be approved.

Let me first echo the points that were made during the last debate, not least by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). I too would much prefer decisions of this type to be made by a functioning democratic Executive in Stormont.

This is one of a number of affirmative procedure statutory instruments to be considered as the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. It will ensure that legislation concerning the control of salmonella in the poultry sector, beef and veal labelling, and seed potato inspections and marketing will continue to function in Northern Ireland after exit.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the legislation apply only to Northern Ireland; is this a separate order for us?

Mr Goodwill: I entirely take the hon. Gentleman's point, but this applies solely to Northern Ireland. Obviously, it applies under different legislation, but the instrument applies specifically to Northern Ireland in the event of a no-deal exit from the European Union.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The subject of seed potatoes has been raised with businesses in my constituency, which have been told that if there is no deal they cannot export them to the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Goodwill: That is indeed the case. Seed potato production in Northern Ireland is less important than it used to be, but 318 hectares of certified seed are still grown there by about 50 growers. Of the 4,000 tonnes marketed, 2,000 were marketed in the Republic, 1,000 were marketed in Northern Ireland, and 1,000 were exported to countries including Egypt, Morocco and the Canary islands. In the event of a no-deal scenario, 2,000 tonnes will be lost. The main varieties grown for the southern market, including Kerr's Pink, Maris Piper and British Queen, are not generally in demand in the UK market, and in the event of no deal an adjustment will therefore be necessary. Growers may wish to switch to new varieties such as Miranda and Opal.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Has the Minister had an opportunity to engage in any discussions with the Ulster Farmers Union or the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association? It is important for consultation to be wide enough to involve those organisations, which represent the farming community throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Goodwill: There was no need for formal consultation, because this is a "no change" piece of legislation. It allows the current situation to continue in the event of a no-deal Brexit. However, conversations took place with many stakeholders, including representatives of the Ulster Farmers Union, who were content that the regulations maintained the status quo.

Ian Paisley: Did the Minister speak to the companies that process potatoes in Northern Ireland? The two main processors are Glens of Antrim Potatoes Ltd, which is in my constituency, and Wilson's Country Ltd. It is essential for them to know that this is going to happen, and that their interests have been taken into consideration.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is right: the potato processing sector is very important. Seed potato production in Northern Ireland is worth about £2 million a year. Ware potatoes are not grown solely for ware, but are also a by-product of seed potato production. Potatoes that are too big to use for seed purposes go into the ware market, which is worth £20 million, but the processing will value-add £200 million. In Scarborough, in my constituency, McCain Foods processes potatoes and slices 1,000 tonnes per day. The processing sector is vital, not least because of the employment that it provides not just for UK citizens but for EU citizens who come here to work in the sector.

Ian Paisley: Does the Minister realise that the scale of potato production on the British mainland is so much more vast than it is in Northern Ireland? In fact, one processing line in England could probably take over the entire capacity of the Northern Irish processors. They have to be protected; otherwise, we will see our potato industry in Northern Ireland diminished.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman makes another very valid point. That is why it is so important that we get this piece of legislation through to enable the current situation to continue.

Northern Ireland people are keen to support the crisps produced locally in Northern Ireland. If I may, I will also just touch on Comber new potatoes. They are renowned throughout Northern Ireland, which grows the variety Maris Piper in the main. They are a protected designation of potato, and I gather that they are grown in the constituency of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). That is another important part of the Northern Ireland potato market.

David Simpson: The Minister talks about protected species, and my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is also a protected species. However, on seed potato, my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned Wilson's Country in my constituency. It will lose £60,000 per week if it cannot export seed potatoes to the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Goodwill: That explains why it is so important that we get a deal across the line. Indeed, having had at least three or four opportunities to vote for that deal, we certainly need to see an orderly way forward.

Let me just comment on the point about the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) needing some sort of protection. I do not think he needs any protection at all. My experience of him in this Chamber is that he can very much stand up for himself and indeed for his constituents, who are involved in not only the agricultural industry but the fishing industry in a very important way.

Jim Shannon: Obviously, in my previous job in the Northern Ireland Assembly, one of the things we tried to do was to ensure that the EU had a protected

position for the Comber potato. It is renowned not just across the whole of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but across the UK mainland as well. Other Members here may say that their potatoes are good; I can only say that ours are the best.

Mr Goodwill: Who could possibly argue with that? I have to say, however, that the new potatoes from Jersey and Pembrokeshire do hit the market slightly sooner than the Comber potatoes. However, the protection of particular locally grown produce is very important. Indeed, we have Lough Neagh eels, which are protected, and Armagh Bramley apples, which also have a great following, not only across the water in Northern Ireland, but here on the mainland too.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the importance of seed potatoes in respect of Northern Ireland and Brexit is because of the possibility of no deal? In that case, growers in Northern Ireland, whose seed potatoes are world renowned, not least because of their disease resistance, will have to change the kind of seed potatoes they produce—he touched on this in his remarks—if they are to export to markets outwith the European Union. That is because what is good for the European Union is not necessarily going to be appropriate for markets in, for example, north Africa. Despite the two years cited in the regulations, it is absolutely imperative that we get this measure on the statute book. If we do not, it is going to be very important for growers in Northern Ireland to be able to diversify in the way I have just described so that they can address markets outside the European Union, which presents a huge opportunity for them.

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend, who chairs the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, is absolutely right as regards the importance of getting this piece of legislation through and on the statute book. Indeed, the quality of seed potatoes produced not only in Northern Ireland but in Scotland and on the higher ground in England is world renowned. Virus diseases can be controlled using propagation methods and the strictures on growing potatoes for seed. That means that we have a world-class standing in terms of the quality of seed that we can produce, with very low levels of the virus diseases that can affect potatoes. That means that we have to continue to keep those standards up.

Let me turn to the other measures in this statutory instrument. The Control of Salmonella in Poultry Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2008, the Control of Salmonella in Broiler Flocks Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, the Control of Salmonella in Turkey Flocks Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) Order 2010, the Beef and Veal Labelling Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 and the Seed Potatoes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 are the measures being amended under this instrument.

These regulations make technical, legal amendments to maintain the effectiveness and continuity of UK legislation that would otherwise be left partially inoperable. Those adjustments represent no changes of policy; nor will they have any impact on businesses or the public. The sifting Committees considered this draft legislation on 21 February 2019. The Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee recommended that this instrument be debated

[Mr Goodwill]

in Parliament as it contained proposed amendments to the Plant Health (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which was in draft at the time. However, this element was laid before Parliament on 5 April 2019 and has been approved by the House.

Due to the decision of the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, parts 5 and 6 of the draft regulations have been omitted and included in the Plant Health (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, and the draft regulation has been renamed the Animal Health, Seed Potatoes and Food (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. So all the contentious or controversial aspects have already been removed, leaving this important but rather hollowed-out measure, which lacks the points that were of interest when it was referred. The draft instrument is being introduced under the correcting powers in sections 8(1) and 14(1) of paragraph 1 of schedule 4 and paragraph 21 of schedule 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Principally, it makes amendments to address technical operability issues as a consequence of EU exit.

This instrument applies to the fields of animal health, the marketing of seed potatoes and the labelling of beef and veal, which are devolved matters for Northern Ireland. The Scottish Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are making similar changes by means of their own secondary legislation within their areas of legislative competence. I know that Opposition Members will mention consultations—indeed, they were mentioned earlier by Democratic Unionist party colleagues—so I will address this question for them. Although there was no statutory requirement to consult publicly on the instrument, officials engaged with key stakeholders covering different sectors to discuss the amendments that would be required and provided the opportunity to gain views on the draft instrument before it was laid. Stakeholders principally included the Ulster Farmers Union.

In regard to the structure of this SI, part 2 of the instrument amends the Control of Salmonella in Poultry Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2008, the Control of Salmonella in Broiler Flocks Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 and the Control of Salmonella in Turkey Flocks Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2010, to maintain and ensure high standards of poultry health. Part 3 amends the Beef and Veal Labelling Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010, providing for the provision of information for non-prepackaged meat of bovine animals aged 12 months or less at the point of sale, establishing a system for identification and labelling of beef and beef products. This ensures the maintenance of the marketing standards of meat and bovine animals. Part 4 amends the Seed Potato Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016, to ensure that high plant health and marketing standards are maintained. It also provides for a one-year interim period during which EU seed potatoes will continue to be recognised for production and marketing in Northern Ireland to ensure the continuity of supplies of seed potatoes.

What are the main changes? When I talk about changes, I mean changes to the text to cater for Brexit, rather than any substantive or policy changes. As with other instruments, various terms in the regulations or the directives that relate to the EU are amended to be relevant to the UK. The instrument updates references

to retained EU legislation in parts 2, 3 and 4. Part 4 also introduces legislation that ensures that the legal requirements for producing and marketing seed potatoes are in place after the UK has left the EU.

There are three main changes. The first involves grade names. The current legislation is the Seed Potatoes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016, which includes all the requirements from the EU directive on seed potatoes—that is, directive 2002/56/EC. In those regulations, seed potatoes are sold in various grades, called union grades, depending on the age and quality of the seed. The instrument renames the union grades as “UK grades”. The actual names of the grades—PB, S, SE and E—are unchanged, as are the requirements to be met for each of the grades.

Secondly, if the UK leaves the EU without a withdrawal agreement, UK seed potatoes will be prohibited from being marketed in the EU. In those circumstances, the UK could also prohibit the marketing in the UK of seed potatoes produced in the EU and Switzerland.

However, the varieties currently purchased by UK growers from the EU are not currently available within the UK. England, Wales and Northern Ireland have therefore agreed that EU seed potatoes will continue to be permitted to be marketed for a period of one year after exit day. That should give the UK industry some time to produce some of these varieties themselves. The instrument gives effect to that change.

For a variety of seed potato to be marketed within the UK, it must be listed on the UK national list or the EU common catalogue. After the UK has left the EU, the instrument will permit the marketing of varieties that are on the EU common catalogue, but not on the UK national list, for a period of two years. That will give the companies that control such varieties time to enter them on the UK national list and will also allow UK growers to continue to have access to those varieties in the interim.

This instrument will ensure that the high biosecurity and marketing standards achieved in both animal and plant health in Northern Ireland are maintained when we leave the European Union, and I commend it to the House.

10.15 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): This legislation is important for the protection of human, animal and plant health and for maintaining important safeguards to ensure food safety information for consumers. The Government can easily ensure the maintenance of such safeguards by agreeing with Labour that there should be a permanent and comprehensive UK-EU customs union, close alignment with the single market, dynamic alignment on rights and protections, and clear commitments on participation in EU agencies. That would ensure that we continue to share knowledge and expertise with EU bodies, avoiding extra costs and burdens for business, saving jobs and protecting our livestock, trees and plants from pests and diseases.

This statutory instrument is another in the series of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs EU exit SIs, of which there have been over 120 to date, using powers in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to make technical changes to retained EU and domestic legislation. This SI covers salmonella in poultry, labelling of beef and veal, and seed potato marketing,

all of which are devolved matters for Northern Ireland, and it is a real shame that there is no functioning Northern Ireland Assembly to scrutinise it.

Labour believes that it is vital that we maintain protections for imported eggs and poultry food products. Despite the discreditable chlorinating process that is supposed to prevent infection, citizens in the US still suffer around 1.2 million cases of salmonella food poisoning a year, and there were 450 deaths last year. What is the current assessment of the level of risk of salmonella in poultry in Northern Ireland? What assessment has been made of the level of risk of salmonella in eggs and poultry food products expected to be imported into Northern Ireland after the UK leaves the EU?

Northern Irish seed potatoes are highly prized and commercially valuable, so it is important to maintain the EU classification and certification regime and protect them from imports that might be of inferior quality or bring in pests and diseases. Similarly, the high quality of Northern Irish beef needs continuing protection via the EU labelling regulations.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that Northern Ireland processes about 2.6 million birds every week. The poultry industry is one of our most vital and supplies about 30% of the entire UK market. Protecting the sector is much more important to our farmers and processors than anything else, and we do not want to implement anything that would damage our local UK market.

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his strong point. Clearly, where the major market is within the UK, that needs to be protected. However, there is always the danger not just that other markets will be lost, but that the UK market may be lost if inferior and cheaper poultry were able to be imported into the UK. The protection of good-quality food from the EU is one of the major planks that it has operated and this SI is an attempt to try to salvage some of that, but whether it will be successful largely depends on all sorts of other issues.

The succession of different versions of this statutory instrument, each with errors and omissions, does not inspire confidence. Despite now being on its fourth version, there may still be an error in regulation 9(b), which amends regulation 4(3)(b) of the Seed Potatoes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016. Can the Minister confirm that the substitute wording should have two “where”s, rather than one “where” and one “were”? It is a minor point but, with the vast amount of work being done on all these SIs over a very short period of time, there have been grammatical errors that might lead to them being difficult to enforce.

Why was Regulation (EC) No. 2160/2003 not included in the three Northern Ireland poultry salmonella orders referred to in regulations 2, 3 and 4 when they were originally made? Numerous changes have been made between the four different versions of this SI that have been presented to Parliament so far. Can the Minister explain whether there is any significance and why the wording of regulation 8(f) and (g) in the previous version has been omitted, why the reference to point A7 of annex III was added to proposed new paragraph (b)(iii) of regulation 2 of the Seed Potatoes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 and why the wording in regulation 9(a) and (c) was omitted in this version? Various changes

have been made, and it is extremely difficult to follow them and to work out why they have been made. Will the Minister commit to correcting any errors that are identified and to ensuring Parliament has the opportunity to consider how stakeholders can be better engaged in the scrutiny of secondary legislation in future, as suggested by Green Alliance?

After 120 different statutory instruments over the past three months, I put on record my admiration for the stupendous amount of hard work done by civil servants in producing all this necessary work, and I crave the Minister’s indulgence in also registering my profound thanks, and the profound thanks of my hon. Friends, to our Opposition staff for their enormous work in preparing us for these statutory instruments. In particular, I thank Roxanne Mashari, Rob Wakely, Will Murray and Eliot Andersen.

We take all these matters extremely seriously and intend to do everything we can to maintain and enhance this country’s record of high standards and scientific excellence as we prepare to leave the EU. I hope the Minister will respond seriously on the matters I have raised. Having said that, we do not intend to vote against the regulations on this occasion.

10.22 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I have a few points to add to what has already been said in this important debate. I commend the Department for bringing forward these regulations and for being on top of it.

The hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) spoke about the issue of scrutiny, and of course we would prefer all these matters to be taken through the Northern Ireland Assembly. I used to chair the Assembly’s agriculture committee, and this place has probably given the seed potatoes bit of these regulations just as much scrutiny as they got from the Northern Ireland Assembly, so the House should not take as punishment the criticism that seed potatoes are not getting enough scrutiny tonight. It is usually just two or three Members who care about these issues when they are addressed in the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is not to shirk the responsibility we would like the Assembly to have once again for these matters.

Northern Ireland produces the best, the tastiest and the most traceable food in all the United Kingdom. It is what we are expert in doing, and any Member who visits Northern Ireland, whether they are drinking liquids from Northern Ireland—Coca-Cola, of course—or indulging in our best food, knows we produce really good food. It is in all our interests to make sure that our primary industry is protected and assisted at this time of immense, radical change.

10.23 pm

Mr Goodwill: I will briefly wind up and answer one or two points that have been raised. I agree with the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) about the quality of Northern Ireland’s food. Indeed, I believe the Ulster fry is the pinnacle of Ulster cuisine in the ingenious way in which it manages to incorporate both potatoes and lard. I always look forward to an Ulster fry when I visit Northern Ireland.

A number of points made by the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) are not specifically relevant to what is before us today, which is about the quality of

[*Mr Goodwill*]

produce produced in Northern Ireland. Matters relating to chlorinated chicken or other issues as regards future international trade deals are important, but they are not specifically before us today. He raised a couple of technical issues where we may or may not have made errors. I would be pleased for us to look at those again and correct any errors we may have made. As I said in relation to an earlier statutory instrument, the quantity of legislation we have had to go through means it is almost certain that we would have made some mistakes, and if they are brought to our attention—or if we notice them first—we will make sure they are put right.

I repeat that this statutory instrument is a “business as usual” SI. It does not make changes; it allows a continuity of the situation should we fall into a no-deal Brexit. If, as I seem to gather from what the hon. Gentleman was saying, he is concerned that we may leave the EU without a deal, the matter is simple: he should, together with his colleagues in the Labour party, vote for the deal to ensure an orderly departure from the EU and to ensure that we move into the implementation period, when many of these sorts of issues can be dealt with in the fullness in time and be properly dealt with. I am disappointed that, particularly in the north of England, where so many constituencies that elected Labour MPs actually voted to leave the EU, some MPs are not listening to their constituents.

Sandy Martin: Does the Minister accept that, if we were to have a permanent customs union and to move in the direction that the Labour party has been calling for, the Government would not need to have a backstop and they might get the support of the party on this side of the House as well?

Mr Goodwill: Staying in the customs union is not what the people in Scarborough and Whitby voted for when they voted—62% was the figure—to leave the EU. In any case, I ask that this measure be approved.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (24 APRIL)

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Wednesday 24 April, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motions in the name of the Leader of the Opposition as if the day were an Opposition Day; proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption and for up to six hours from the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Jo Churchill.*)

Looe Flood Protection Project

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Jo Churchill.*)

10.27 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to see the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) on the Front Bench to respond to my debate. The town of Looe, in my constituency, will be familiar to many right hon. and hon. Members, and to millions of people across the country, for its glorious scenery, fishing heritage and working port, and for summer holidays on a golden sandy beach. I know and love the town and its community. It was my late husband’s home port for his fishing business, and it is now a privilege to represent the people of Looe in this House. However, behind the picture-postcard image, the very existence of Looe is under serious threat from flooding.

We will all be aware that many parts of the UK have experienced flooding in the recent past, but Looe is different. It is the most frequently flooded town in the UK. If scientists are correct about the impact of climate change, the risk to the town and its future prosperity can only be increased. Modelling for the Cornish south coast regeneration project has suggested that within a generation floods will be one metre worse, increasing the flooded area from 2.5 hectares to 16 hectares. That would be catastrophic for the town and the wider local economy.

I can testify to the resilience of Looe’s residents and businesses in the face of regular, devastating floods, which I have witnessed. I have seen at first hand their remarkable fortitude and inventiveness in dealing with the aftermath of floods, including the awful foul water pollution. But the impact is now so severe that it is threatening the viability of the local economy, with damages amounting to £39 million over the past five years alone, deterring investment and reducing opportunities for growth.

It is shocking that 65% of businesses in Looe have been flooded, costing each an average of £31,000. Many cannot get insurance so cannot, or understandably will not, invest further in their businesses. Worryingly, nearly a quarter of those businesses—the lifeblood of the local economy—have considered their future in the town. The flooding also deters new businesses from locating in Looe and shoppers and holidaymakers from visiting, and there is a detrimental effect on the wider community, as Looe’s economic footprint stretches far beyond the town and into communities, holiday parks and businesses right across South East Cornwall.

Looe is located in what can only be described as a geographical perfect storm. It sits at the bottom of the narrowest part of the Looe valley, where the river meets the sea. Numerous storms and predicted rising sea levels, combined with high tides, are making flooding commonplace. Typically, flood events occur several times a year. During the 2013-14 winter season, the events were particularly severe, and considerable damage occurred to the quay walls as waves surged over the harbour. The frequency of floods and their severity are clearly getting worse.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I sought the hon. Lady's permission to intervene. She referred to the winter of 2013-14; in my constituency of Strangford there are some 96 coastal erosion locations, including a number of villages. That indicates the severity of what is taking place. I have written letters to Westminster Ministers on this matter. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is essential that a UK-wide fund is set up to address this matter now, before it is too late and we end up losing villages, which is possible, down my Ards peninsula and in towns throughout the UK because of an inability to deal with the pressures from flooding?

Mrs Murray: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman and am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister has heard his concerns.

Currently, flooding extends over 2.5 hectares. This at-risk area includes essential services and facilities such as the GP surgery, the police station, main food stores and cafes, as well as the fish market, which accounts for 10% of landings in Cornwall and is a national centre for the inshore day catch of high-quality, high-value fish, which is used to support many London restaurants. The fire station is also under threat—so much so that the fire engine has to be moved to the top of the hill during a flood. Essential transport links are at risk, including the main road bridge connecting east and west Looe, the railway station, and two miles of railway track, on which there have been 141 flooding incidents to date.

According to Looe Harbour Commissioners, flooding because of high sea-water levels, possibly combined with wave action in the inner harbour, is the dominant cause of water damage. High sea levels can occur when high tides coincide with storm surges, causing water levels in the inner harbour to rise and sometimes overtop the quay walls and/or adjacent low-lying parts of the town. When flooding incidents occur, the owners of a lot of the fishing boats put a plank along their vessels' fenders to prevent the staffs that hold the quay in place from staving in the sides of their vessels. Wave action can speed up the process of flooding by causing waves to overtop the quay walls to lower-lying areas of the town adjacent to the inner harbour. In addition, wave action can cause structural damage to the harbour walls and structures adjacent to the inner harbour.

Also, surface water flooding from intense rainfall affects part of Looe. In addition, high tide levels prevent the discharge of water into the harbour, further exacerbating flooding associated with surface water. It is apparent from the surface water flood maps that floodwater accumulates on low-lying areas near the harbour. These risks are multiple and complex but must now be mitigated, and the huge potential for future investment and growth seized.

A partnership-based approach in consultation with the local community has been key in developing an economically viable and environmentally friendly solution to the flooding challenges. I must put on record my thanks to the lead partner, Cornwall Council, the Environment Agency, Looe Harbour Commissioners, Looe Town Council and East Looe Town Trust for all their work on the proposal, which I will outline briefly later.

I am also grateful to the commissioners and the council for funding the initial expert study, which has enabled the proposal to be produced, and it is supported

by both the local community—with more than 95% of the respondents in favour of the scheme—and landowners and aligned with the Looe neighbourhood plan. The proposal, if fully developed, funded and delivered, will allow Looe to protect key infrastructure, including removing more than 200 properties from flood risk and creating opportunities for investment. It is anticipated that there will be in excess of £47 million of growth benefits.

Briefly, phase 1 involves five projects: a tidal barrier installation to stop tidal flooding; an extension to the Banjo pier to improve river flow and bathing water quality; flood protection of east Looe beach to address wave action; an inner breakwater tidal barrier protection; and a new walkway from Pennyland in the town to Hannafore, restoring the missing link of the south-west coast path. Phase 2 will look to investigate the development of an outer breakwater and create a new working harbour.

Given my very personal interest in sea safety, I am also delighted that Looe Harbour Commissioners believe that the proposals will improve health and safety in the port and support the work of the emergency services such as the RNLI. I am pleased that at the heart of the proposal is the improved access to water for all, including for children, disabled people and the elderly through an all states of the tide easy access landing stage. There is also massive potential for enhanced recreational facilities and marine biology innovations such as mussel beds or even a lobster hatchery such as the one at Padstow. The possibilities are endless.

A further benefit from investment in flood defences will be to realise the growth of integrated travel and leisure opportunities. This includes a cycle network in the same vein as north Cornwall's cycle links such as the very popular Camel Trail, which attracts half a million visitors a year. It is expected that the potential revenue from an integrated cycle network could be as much as £10 million per year. I am sure that many cycling businesses across south-east Cornwall would be delighted to get a spoke of this particular wheel.

Now for the challenging aspect of funding, which is why I am delighted to have secured this debate with the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal, responding. The cost of the overall scheme is currently estimated at £41 million. Further work is now required on the detailed design and bid for funding to integrate the Looe neighbourhood plan and develop plans for both the Looe Valley branch railway line and network of cycle paths. Cornwall Council has committed £2.3 million to undertake the detailed design and prepare the business case. It has also agreed terms to purchase land to increase the capacity of Looe railway station which links the town to the mainline at Liskeard. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly local enterprise partnership has also committed funding to assess the wider economic benefits of the project to south-east Cornwall. I want to put on record my thanks to the LEP for its financial commitments and work thus far.

My hon. Friend will appreciate that the work to date has been a great example of cross-organisational working, financing and community engagement. I am aware that DEFRA's flood defence grant in aid funding cannot be provided for this initial stage of the scheme, which is why funding from Cornwall Council and other local partners is so welcome. I accept that the delivery of the

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

scheme is not a role for the Department and central Government alone. That is why I have been so keen to stress that this is about a partnership with all the authorities, as well as the local residents and businesses doing their bit every step of the way. However, given the significant economic, environmental and social benefits, I hope that this approach can be replicated across Government Departments to secure the necessary capital funding for construction once the business case is submitted. This is expected to be in the next financial year of 2020-21. It is very encouraging that the Environment Agency has confirmed that £3.7 million of funding is eligible for a scheme that reduces flood risk in Looe, and has said that it will assess whether this can be increased to reflect the wider socioeconomic benefits of the project.

The benefits of the project reach far beyond the key objective of flood prevention and protection. It will safeguard the entire town centre, fishing fleet and harbour. Without it, the town centre is unlikely to remain viable beyond 20 to 30 years due to persistent and recurrent flooding. It is envisaged that the project will be a regeneration hub for the wider area, forming part of the strategic coastal transport hub for South East Cornwall and beyond. It will enable homes and jobs for local people, with the development of around 670 homes and more than 1 hectare of employment land. The scheme will protect Looe for a generation as the focal point of the local area. It will be able to flourish and grow. According to the Cornish south coast regeneration project, it will also support the wider economy of Cornwall.

Support and capital funding for the delivery of the Looe flood protection project will secure a sustainable future for Looe and harness the economic benefits for the town, surrounding communities, South East Cornwall and the wider county of Cornwall as a whole. I look forward to hearing what my hon. Friend has to say.

10.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing this important debate. In fact, this is the first time that I have spoken to her in this House since I had the privilege of attending her wonderful marriage to the wonderful Bob Davidson less than a month ago. May I—on behalf of many people, I am sure—wish them both many years of happiness to come?

My hon. Friend has been a passionate advocate for the Looe flood protection scheme and generally for growth in Cornwall and the south-west. We have discussed this issue before, when she also brought along people from Cornwall Council and commissioners from Looe harbour, and I welcome the opportunity to do so again. I take this opportunity to recognise the work that she has been doing to raise awareness of the flooding experienced by people and businesses in Looe. I commend her for taking a long-term view to managing flood risk and recognising how flood risk management infrastructure can contribute to the future prosperity of the people she represents.

I am mindful of my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raising this issue again on behalf of his constituents. Although he will accept that

this is a devolved matter, the amount of money that this Government have put into protecting flood defences around the country is reflected in the Barnett formula. I hope that he will continue to put the case on behalf of his constituents.

I am also mindful of the challenges faced by the town in that it regularly experiences flooding. The town centre, harbour and key transport and community infrastructure are all located within the main flood zone. As a fellow MP for a coastal community, I recognise the national importance of our coast and the challenges that these areas face. Flood and coastal risk management is a high priority for the Government. I know very well the impacts that flooding can have on lives and livelihoods. Compelling evidence suggests that climate change may lead to increases in sea levels by the middle of this century. Both present significant risks, so we are putting in place robust, long-term national strategies to protect our coastal communities.

I am aware that the Environment Agency has identified a potential option for a flood risk management scheme in Looe, using demountable defences, at a cost of approximately £10 million. My hon. Friend referred to schemes costing £40 million, and we need to consider those carefully. I am also aware that the local community prefers a wider socioeconomic regeneration scheme, to which she referred extensively, that includes a tidal barrier to manage flood risk. Cornwall Council is now leading on the delivery of this preferred option, with support from the Environment Agency that she generously recognises. The preferred scheme to which she refers consists of five elements that would all need to be delivered to meet the strategic objectives of the scheme. These include tidal barriers, beach protections and a pier extension. In terms of the flood defence grant-in-aid funding, my hon. Friend recognised that on today's formula that scheme would qualify for only £3.7 million, which would not fully fund the proposal. However, I commend her and Cornwall Council, which is using £2.3 million of its economic development match funding to deliver the detailed design work for the scheme. The designs will be used to attract funding from wider sources. As she points out, she hopes, rightly, to continue to make the case on why this may attract further central Government funding as well.

As well as protecting communities, flood risk management systems create improved confidence in a local economy, encouraging growth and supporting environmental improvements. It is vital that we take a long-term view of the environment, as outlined in our 25-year environment plan. I commend Cornwall Council, Looe Harbour Commissioners and the community for taking a wider regeneration approach that has a high level of public and business support. While the proposal would reduce the risk of flooding, there are further benefits in enabling development, generating growth and improving the bathing water quality. The improvement of the travel network and cycle networks would also contribute to the economic prosperity of the region and further encourage tourism. My hon. Friend talked about a spoke in a wheel. I wish it were as cheap as a penny-farthing, but she will recognise, as will the hon. Member for Strangford, that that is not necessarily the case.

These benefits tie in with a number of wider Government aims. I encourage my hon. Friend and the local partners to continue their efforts to identify further funding from

the full range of available sources. The partnership funding policy that this Government introduced clarifies the level of investment that communities can expect from the Government so that it is clear what levels of partnership funding they will need from other sources to allow projects to proceed. The overall call on the grant-in-aid funding exceeds the total amount of funding available, so we need to prioritise to optimise the overall outcomes from the investment of taxpayers' money. The current formula takes into account the impacts of flooding, including the frequency, severity and depth of potential floods and the impacts on health. It is people-centred in the sense that it weighs the Government support more towards households, and hence the impacts on people, than on other economic benefits, including the impacts on businesses. As it stands, there are no plans to change the current funding formula before 2021, though I am very conscious of the demands on, in particular, coastal communities and more sparsely populated communities. I am therefore considering what we can do within the next spending review and the funding formula change to consider the impact on local employers and, in turn, on local communities.

Overall, the Government are investing £2.6 billion to better protect the country from flooding, and this, through partnership funding, will attract more than £600 million of additional investment. That will fund well over 1,000 flood defence schemes, which will better protect 300,000 homes by 2021 and is projected to save the economy more than £30 billion in avoided damage. As well as capital for new flood defences, between 2015 and 2020 we will spend more than £1 billion on the maintenance of flood defence assets.

Partnership funding, to which my hon. Friend referred, can be secured from a range of sources, including local beneficiaries, partners and growth funds. Early indications suggest that up to 25% more schemes will go ahead in the coming years than if project costs were met by the Government alone. As my hon. Friend will recognise, it

is not possible to deliver every scheme in the current programme that would reduce flood risk, and it is my duty as Floods Minister to take a national perspective on flood risk management. However, I assure her that I am fully alive to the issues she has raised regarding the businesses and residents of Looe.

The Environment Agency will continue to support and work with local partners on a positive solution for Looe, and I encourage the council and partners in their bids to secure additional funding. I very much look forward to seeing how the scheme develops, including its potential to develop local tourism in an environmentally sustainable way.

I thank my hon. Friend again for raising this issue. The Government, the Environment Agency and our flood defence delivery partners entirely understand the challenges present in Looe, and we will continue to support Cornwall Council and its partners in developing the flood scheme. I commend the long-term view to managing the flood risk in the town and considering wider socioeconomic regeneration. I encourage people to continue to work together, with my hon. Friend's leadership, to identify a solution that meets Looe's long-term needs.

As I said, I am looking at the funding arrangements ahead of the next capital programme, and we are working closely with the Treasury to consider future investment needs and the Government's role in supporting the resilience of communities. I take on board what my hon. Friend has said. While I recognise that I have not been able to sign a cheque to guarantee the future of these flood defences, she continues to make me aware of what matters to our coastal communities, and we will continue to have those discussions.

Question put and agreed to.

10.51 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Wednesday 24 April 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE AND THE CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was asked—

Government Subcontractors and Suppliers: Payment

1. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that all Government suppliers and subcontractors are paid on time. [910471]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): It is important to all suppliers, not least small businesses, that they are paid on time. That is why I have announced that, from this September, we will exclude suppliers from winning contracts if they fail to pay their subcontractors on time. Just this month, I contacted all suppliers to remind them of this intention.

Mark Pawsey: I welcome what the Minister has just said, but a significant proportion of Government procurement is on construction projects, where there are often poor payment practices, such as those exposed during the collapse of Carillion. The Federation of Small Businesses' "Fair Pay Fair Play" campaign, which carries the message that everyone deserves to be paid on time, is asking for those projects to be made the subject of separate project bank accounts. Is the Minister considering that?

Oliver Dowden: Yes. My hon. Friend raises an important point. The Government already use project bank accounts on all construction projects, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so. That is just one way of ensuring our underlying objective of prompt and fair payment. It sits alongside initiatives such as paying our suppliers on time, excluding late payers and appointing prompt payment non-executive directors in all Departments.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that small businesses are the backbone of our economy, will the Minister outline when we can expect to see the follow-through of the proposed policy whereby suppliers will be unable to win Government contracts unless they are seen to be making prompt payments?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to remind the House of that commitment. I announced in November that we will be bringing that policy into practice from September this year. The policy will mean that companies will face being excluded from Government contracts if they fail to pay their suppliers on time in two consecutive quarters.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which Government Departments have the best record in paying their suppliers on time, and which have the worst?

Oliver Dowden: I can tell my hon. Friend that the latest data shows that 10 of the 16 Government Departments were meeting the target of paying 90% of suppliers within five days, and 10 were also meeting the target of at least 96% of invoices within the 30-day target, so there is a good record overall.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): The Minister's own Department has seen a threefold increase in late payments over the last couple of years. As we know, the Government are diverted from their day jobs with daydreams of a new Prime Minister, and this distracted Government are raising incompetence to a completely new level. We have seen that they are careless when paying small and medium-sized enterprises that provide services to the public, and those SMEs are the backbone of our economy. Yet the Government are very careful when it comes to outsourcing to wounded giants such as Interserve or failed dinosaurs such as Carillion. Is it not time that the Minister and his Department got their act together?

Oliver Dowden: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I am dreaming of nothing but securing my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in her continued position as Prime Minister.

Jon Trickett: "It says here."

Oliver Dowden: Sadly, I do not have a note on that point.

I can also reassure the hon. Gentleman on his point regarding prompt payments in my own Department, the Cabinet Office. According to the latest figures, in March we paid 88% of all our suppliers within five days and 98% within 30 days—a perfectly credible record.

Nancy Astor: Centenary of Election

2. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What plans the Government have to use the centenary of Nancy Astor's election to encourage more women to stand for public office. [910472]

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): We are all indebted to this groundbreaking Conservative Member of Parliament, who won her seat the year after women first got the vote. The Government are using the suffrage centenary fund to support some 350 projects, including training in political leadership in Bradford and Birmingham, and skills sessions in the east midlands, west midlands and London.

Mrs Murray: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming plans to commemorate Lady Nancy Astor, the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons, with a statue in Plymouth?

Brandon Lewis: Absolutely. I welcome the extraordinary efforts of the campaigners who have achieved funding for a statue of Nancy Astor through public donations, particularly as there are—let us be frank—too few statues celebrating and commemorating the amazing contribution that women have made in helping to shape our nation. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that she has done to support this project.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Can we also remember the two pioneering women who closely followed Nancy Astor: the Liberal Margaret Wintringham and the great MP for East Ham, Susan Lawrence?

Brandon Lewis: Absolutely—I am happy to do that. As I said, there are too few memorials and commemorations of the great efforts and contributions made to society by women throughout the ages, and I am very happy to congratulate all those who do their bit for public service.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Two years ago, we celebrated 50 years since Winnie Ewing was elected to the House of Commons; perhaps that should be reflected here. I do not know what the Government would do to celebrate Nancy Astor that they would not do to celebrate Constance Markievicz, who was the first woman to be elected to Parliament. The Scottish Government recently held a consultation on electoral reform that specifically included ways to improve gender and minority representation. Will this Government do the same thing and bring forward real proposals?

Brandon Lewis: If I remember correctly, Constance Markievicz did not take her seat, but as I said, I congratulate anyone who contributes to public life. We must all work to highlight and promote the fantastic work done by women across our country over the years in a range of public service roles, which would be a good way to encourage more people to contribute in the future.

Cyber-security

3. **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help improve the cyber security of public and private sector organisations. [910473]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): While the Government can manage and have been managing the security risk, it is essential that the cyber-security and engineering flaws in Huawei products are fixed. The National Cyber Security Centre has set out the improvements we expect the company to make and will not compromise on the improvements we need to see, in particular sustained evidence of better software engineering and cyber-security.

Neil O'Brien: Will the Minister update the House on the distinction the Government make between different types of infrastructure equipment from Huawei, and how that will be used to respond to the centre's recommendations?

Mr Lidington: We have the independent Huawei cyber-security evaluation centre to look at what the company is doing to meet the commitments we require of it. Looking to the future, the Government are committed to taking decisions on the 5G supply chain based on evidence and a hard-headed assessment of the risk. We have undertaken a thorough review of that supply chain; the decisions based on that review will be announced in due course, and to this House first.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Given the concerns about Huawei's involvement in our 5G network, what more can the right hon. Gentleman say about the steps the Government are taking to secure our critical national information infrastructure?

Mr Lidington: From the Government's point of view, the security and resilience of the UK's telecoms networks are of paramount importance. We think we have robust procedures in place to manage any risks to national security today. Looking forward to the roll-out of 5G, we have three clear priorities: stronger cyber-security practices across the entire telecoms sector, greater resilience within individual telecoms networks, and—crucially—diversity in the supply chain for 5G. These are matters that go beyond any single company.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will know that the Government are about to award a £300 million contract including requirements to host British citizens' biometric data. To protect the security and privacy of British citizens, can he guarantee that that data will not be held by foreign companies subject to foreign Government laws giving foreign Government access to British citizens' private data?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, any tendering exercise that the Government undertake has to be subject to the normal rules on open public procurement, but I know that the Home Secretary, who is responsible for the proposed database, will give the highest priority to ensuring the security of that sensitive personal data.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It has been reported that the Prime Minister has given Huawei the green light to help to build the UK's 5G network, against the advice of Ministers, our international allies and our security services, yet Huawei has itself said that it will take up to five years to secure its equipment. Why do the Government have more confidence than Huawei has in its ability to build our 5G network safely and securely?

Mr Lidington: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), the security and resilience of our telecommunications networks are of paramount importance in every decision the Government take on these matters. We have undertaken a thorough review of the entire 5G supply chain, which is designed to ensure that we can roll out 5G in a secure and resilient way. We will announce our decisions about that to this House in due course.

House of Lords Membership

4. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce the size of the membership of the House of Lords. [910474]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Government are committed to supporting measures to reduce the size of the other place on which they can command a consensus across both Houses, such as the positive trend in retirements. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is also committed to maintaining her restrained approach to appointments.

Alan Brown: The Minister mentioned consensus, but the reality is that due to Brexit and the PM's failed leadership, this House is completely gridlocked, which gives the bishops and hereditary peers in the unelected Lords more power than ever and a greater say in Scotland's future than the Scottish Parliament itself. Does he agree with his Scottish Tory colleague, MSP Murdo Fraser, that the other place needs to be scrapped?

Kevin Foster: In the last week we sat, the Scottish National party was praising the House of peers. This week it is calling for it to be scrapped again. The focus now, with the issues facing this country, is to get on with delivering a Brexit deal that works for the whole United Kingdom, rather than spend our time building constitutional grievances, as the separatists wish to do.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment to the Front Bench and his outstanding responses so far. Notwithstanding any reservations we may have about the unelected place, is it not the case that on occasion, the standard of debate there can be a lot higher than here?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend. I am sure that over his 27 years in this House he has seen plenty of very high-standard debates. In fact, he has contributed to raising that standard on many occasions. The House of Lords plays a special part in our constitution as a revising Chamber, subject, as always, to the supremacy of this elected House.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his place. Unelected, out of touch, unresponsive—the House of Lords is not only a relic from a bygone era; it is a stain on our modern democracy. When will the Cabinet team live up to its public duty and lead a serious constitutional debate in this country to modernise our democracy and get rid of the House of Lords?

Kevin Foster: As I touched on earlier, the vast majority of people in this country—certainly in Torbay, and across the rest of the UK—would not see this House spending months on constitutional navel-gazing as the top priority at the moment. Many people have talked about reforming the House of Lords over the last century, and the Government will look at proposals that could enjoy a broad consensus, but for now, with the pressures on the legislative programme, few would understand if we decided to dedicate months to this.

Government Departments: Real Living Wage

5. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): If he will make it his policy to (a) introduce the real living wage in all Government Departments and (b) seek accreditation from the Living Wage Foundation. [910475]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I am pleased to tell the House that from 1 April, the Government increased the national living wage by almost 5% to £8.21 per hour, which gives an annual pay rise of almost £700 to full-time workers on the national living wage. That is our preferred approach to addressing low pay across both the public and private sectors.

David Linden: Of course, the national living wage is not a real living wage, and it does not apply to under-25s, so that is a load of mince, frankly. Why would the Government want to perpetuate age inequality in terms of pay? Is the Minister proud of the fact that this Government actively discriminate against young people, including his own civil servants?

Oliver Dowden: I find it extraordinary how the hon. Gentleman denigrates the national living wage. The national living wage has handed a pay rise of £3,000 to the lowest-paid workers since it was introduced, and it is rising faster than the real living wage. In respect of under-25s, we need flexibility for younger workers, to help them get into the labour market. That is a sensible compromise.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The reality is that the Government's living wage is not the living wage set by the Living Wage Commission, but putting that aside, can the Minister set out what representations he has made to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to ensure that Members of this House can become living wage employers? My understanding is that it will not let us do that.

Oliver Dowden: Relations with IPSA are a matter for the Leader of the House, not for a Cabinet Office Minister such as myself, but I have heard the hon. Gentleman's representations and I am sure the Leader of the House will have heard them as well.

Mr Speaker: What I can add, which I hope will be of some reassurance to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), is that the House of Commons is indeed an accredited living wage employer and has been for some time. I hope that that warms the cockles of the hon. Gentleman's heart.

European Parliament Elections: Candidate Intimidation

6. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to prevent the intimidation of candidates in the event that the UK participates in the upcoming European Parliament elections. [910477]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The Government will work closely with the police and electoral administrators to tackle any reports or allegations of intimidation, as we do in the run-up to all elections.

Kerry McCarthy: I am very glad that the Minister is taking this seriously. There will be so many of us in this House who have seen an escalation of threats and abuse in the current political climate, and there is a real fear—when we have the likes of Nigel Farage saying that the European elections are an opportunity to put the “fear of God” into politicians—that such people run the risk of stoking up that kind of intimidation and aggressive behaviour. What can the Minister do to try to ensure that everyone conducts the European elections in a moderate, temperate, professional way?

Mr Lidington: I think there is a responsibility on politicians of all political parties—left, right and centre—to try to conduct elections in a spirit, yes, of democratic argument and debate, but also in a spirit of mutual respect for the fact that, in a pluralist democracy, we are entitled to disagree and to express our disagreement; and then to accept the election result however that turns out and to get on with people of other parties, who have an equal democratic mandate to our own.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I recently had the honour to co-host a conference on misogyny and antisemitism. May I urge the Government to do everything they can to make sure these two forms of hate crime do not prevent women from participating in elections and making their voices heard in the democratic process?

Mr Lidington: I agree wholly with what my right hon. Friend has just said. I think one of the most shocking features I have found about life in the House of Commons in the last few years is to learn, in particular from women MPs of different political parties, how they have often been singled out for the sort of misogynistic, brutal abuse that far too many have suffered.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): May I ask the Minister what support he can give to local authorities, and particularly to polling station staff, who in fact may be the most vulnerable during the European election campaign?

Mr Lidington: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have been consulting on creating a new electoral offence of intimidating candidates and campaigners. As far as the staff are concerned, any intimidation or abuse is *prima facie* a breach of existing criminal law, and I hope that political party representatives and presiding officers would have no hesitation in reporting such things to the police.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am very clear and I think the Government are very clear that it is the duty of all politicians of all parties to call out abuse and intimidation wherever and whenever it happens. However, in this particular instance, would it not just be better to keep our promises, and call off these farcical elections?

Mr Lidington: It would indeed be the Government’s hope that, even now, we could agree and ratify the withdrawal agreement and give effect to it, which would make it possible for these elections not to take place, but the only way to stop these elections taking place is to

bring into effect the withdrawal agreement or to pass primary legislation through Parliament disapplying our international obligations.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am very worried about the fact that other candidates are already trying to intimidate candidates. Using language like “fear of God” is not a good way to go about our democracy. I was at a conference this morning at which a country, Eritrea, was trying to discuss how to build a democracy. Surely the Minister for the Cabinet Office will wish to be stronger in his language in condemning the outrageous language of other candidates using words such as “fear of God”?

Mr Lidington: I think I was very clear in my earlier comments that there is a profound responsibility on politicians, particularly political leaders, of any party to show moderation and restraint in the language they use about political opponents.

Topical Questions

T1. [910486] **Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): May I start by welcoming my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) to his new ministerial role, and by wishing my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) the best of luck as she starts her maternity leave and thanking her for the work she has championed to stop intimidation in public life?

The CyberUK 2019 cyber-security conference begins today in Glasgow. I am pleased that I will address that conference tomorrow, where I will outline our work to ensure that the UK remains a global leader in cyber-security.

Royston Smith: Ministers will know that I never miss an opportunity to talk about jobs and opportunities for my Southampton, Itchen constituents. More people are in work than ever before, but not all jobs are well paid with good opportunities. A Government relocation to Southampton would help to give my constituents more opportunities. Has the Minister considered relocation to Southampton as part of the Places for Growth programme? If not, why not?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I know what a strong champion my hon. Friend is for the city of Southampton. I have heard his representations and am very happy to extend him an invitation: officials from my Department can meet him and representatives from Southampton to see what we can do in that area.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): There are currently 2 million European citizens registered to vote in the UK, many of whom will be using their votes in the local elections next Thursday. However, in order to be eligible to vote in the European elections on 23 May, they will need to complete some paperwork. So far, fewer than 300 of those citizens have completed the paperwork, which would usually have been distributed by electoral registration officers from January onwards.

Due to the short timescale for the administration of the European elections, I have heard that many European citizens are considering taking legal action against the Government. What consideration has the Minister given to that, and what measures could the Government take to help European citizens use their vote in the European elections here in the UK?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): I appreciate that the shadow Minister's point is about the time to make a declaration rather than the registration deadline. She will appreciate that the Government's approach needs to be determined by the law and what affects it, but I am happy to look at the issue, respond to her in writing and lay a copy of that response in the House Library.

T3. [910489] **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What steps are Ministers taking to encourage the use of innovative technology for the delivery of public services?

Oliver Dowden: This is a major priority for the Cabinet Office, which is why earlier this month I announced £1.5 million in funding for 10 projects that will use location-based data to improve public services, and why I will shortly publish a strategy outlining how we will harness the power of innovative technology across the whole of Government.

T2. [910488] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): Millions of people are not registered on the electoral roll, and they are much more likely to be from an ethnic minority, young or from a lower demographic class. Does not it say everything about this Government that at a time when we should be trying to get more people on to the register, they are doing everything they can to keep people off the register?

Kevin Foster: This is the Government who introduced online registration, which has made it much easier for people to get on the register and has resulted in among the highest numbers of registrations, so the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question is completely wrong.

T5. [910491] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Does the Minister agree that, as the Institute for Government has recently pointed out, the Government have outsourced many public services precisely because the public sector was delivering them poorly, and that any plans to end outsourcing are motivated by political ideology, not by what is best for the taxpayer?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight those recent comments, which were clear that Labour's outsourcing policy risks creating major implementation problems and losing the benefits that outsourcing has brought for taxpayers, without any guarantee that services would improve. This Government will continue to make decisions on outsourcing based on the evidence, not on ideology.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: In congratulating the hon. Member for Huddersfield on the birth of his 12th grandchild—another Sheermanite in the world—I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

T4. [910490] **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will pass that message on to the new baby. Yesterday another little girl—a little Swedish girl—came to this place and reminded us how we must act dramatically to face up to climate change and the challenges of climate change. What is the Minister doing to totally re-energise every Department of State on climate change?

Mr Lidington: I think the young woman to whom the hon. Gentleman refers spoke for her generation. All of us who go into schools and colleges in our constituencies know how the issue of climate change inspires and drives political priorities among many of our young constituents. Every Department in this Government is committed to delivering the ambitious plan to reduce carbon emissions and secure our environmental objectives by the 2050 deadline. There is no difference between any Ministers about the need to get on with that.

T6. [910492] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the fact that disabled candidates in the forthcoming local elections will, thanks to this Government, be able to access dedicated disability-related funding to support the specific needs they face, without it counting towards elections expenses?

Kevin Foster: It is vital that those who stand for office are representative of our society. As a Government, we are taking action to achieve that through a £250,000 fund for disabled candidates in the forthcoming English local election in May. That will help to create a level playing field for disabled and non-disabled candidates.

T7. [910493] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline what discussions have taken place with social media outlets, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and others, to strike the delicate balance between freedom of thought and opinion, and security and freedom from cyber-bullying?

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman alludes to the fact that there is a delicate balance to strike between ensuring that people can freely express opinions and ensuring that the Government do not get involved in regulating opinions. It is about making sure that facts are accurate. That is why we are working with colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on the online harms White Paper to ensure that we can tackle those challenges and strike the right balance on freedom of speech.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I have met several innovative small businesses in Fareham recently, for example the IT business Silver Lining. Many such small and medium-size enterprises would like more opportunities to work closely with the Government. What steps are the Government taking to enable greater contracting with SMEs?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this important challenge. We have set a demanding target of 33% of all Government business going to SMEs, and our forthcoming innovation strategy will look at exactly that point—how we can make it easier for SMEs to win innovative Government work.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that we need to eradicate fake news at source, and that that includes a more ethical approach to Government advertising spend to ensure it does not go on online fake news sites?

Kevin Foster: The Government take disinformation very seriously. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is leading cross-Government work to tackle it, including through the online harms White Paper. The role of Government is to make sure that electors have the facts in public debate, not to regulate opinions people may form on them.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [910494] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 24 April.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I have been asked to reply on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who is today in Belfast attending the funeral of Lyra McKee. This was a brutal, cowardly murder of a young woman, a brilliant journalist, who represented all that is good in Northern Ireland. Those responsible for her murder have nothing to offer anyone from any community in Northern Ireland. I am sure that Members right across the House will want to join me in sending our deepest sympathies to Lyra's partner Sara, her other family members and her friends. As her family have asked, we today say that we stand with Lyra. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

The attack on three Christian churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday was a horrific and cowardly act. The House will know that a number of British citizens were killed. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spoke to the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka to send her condolences to all affected and to offer his Government any assistance they may need. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending sympathy and condolences to all who were caught in that horrific attack, but I hope, too, that the House will perhaps reflect on the fact that that atrocity, committed on Easter Sunday, came just a couple of weeks after an equally brutal and appalling attack in Christchurch, New Zealand upon the Muslim community worshipping there. As we stand today between Easter and, next week, the beginning of the solemn month of Ramadan for our Muslim fellow citizens, I hope that this will be a time for not just Members, but all our fellow citizens of all faiths and none, to come together and stand up for the values of mutual respect, tolerance and religious diversity, which embody what is best about our country.

Jack Brereton: I echo those thoughts of sympathy and condolence.

Rejuvenating our town centres in Stoke-on-Trent is absolutely essential. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the Open Doors pilot that was recently announced for Fenton in my constituency and agree that our future high streets fund bid for Longton must also succeed?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the Open Doors pilot in his constituency. We very much welcome bids from places such as Longton town centre for this fund. My right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary is going to study all the bids carefully before making a decision later this year, but he and I know that my hon. Friend will be a doughty champion of the claims of his constituency in particular.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The Minister for the Cabinet Office and I usually enjoy trading a few jokes at these sessions, but sadly, this really is not a week for laughter. We on the Opposition side join him in standing in solidarity and shared grief with the people of Sri Lanka and all those who lost loved ones in the Easter Sunday slaughter of peaceful worshippers and innocent tourists, at least 45 of them children. Among them was the eight-year-old cousin of my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). It was an act of utter depravity and evil, which stands in sharp contrast to the words of love written by Ben Nicholson about his wife and the children that he lost.

Yesterday we also celebrated the life, but mourned the loss, of Billy McNeill, the first Briton to lift the European cup and a man who spent his life fighting against sectarian hatred. And last Thursday, we mourned the senseless murder of the brilliant young journalist Lyra McKee, whose funeral the Prime Minister is right to attend and whose death was a horrific reminder of where sectarian hatred ultimately leads. We stand with Lyra. In her name, can I ask the Minister to tell us what the Government are doing to bring her killers to justice and protect Northern Ireland from a return to terror?

Mr Lidington: I very much welcome both the tone and the words of the right hon. Lady. I also share in her tribute to Billy McNeill, who died on Monday. He made no fewer than 790 appearances for Celtic, and it is a testament to an extraordinary career that he also won 31 major trophies as a manager and a player. Our thoughts and sympathies are with his family and friends.

As the right hon. Lady will fully understand, decisions about criminal investigations in Northern Ireland are a matter for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the independent Public Prosecution Service. We very much hope as a Government that any member of the public who has information that will lead to Lyra's murderers being brought to justice will come forward. I am hopeful, given the sense of community solidarity that there has been in Londonderry/Derry and in Northern Ireland generally, that that information will be forthcoming.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I know that he speaks with huge authority and passion on this issue. Reading the statement from the so-called New IRA last week, with its talk of "attacking enemy forces" and its "sincere condolences" for Lyra's death, was a sickening throwback to the days that we

thought that we had left behind 20 years ago, from despicable individuals whose only desire is to turn back the clock and destroy the progress that has been made. Does the Minister agree that that is one of the central reasons why we must find an answer to the Northern Ireland border question rather than give these evil terrorists the divisions that they crave?

Mr Lidington: I would draw a distinction. I regard both issues that the right hon. Lady raises as important, but I do not think those murderers in Derry were motivated by any thoughts about the border or customs arrangements, important though those issues are. I agreed, however, with what she said about the utter unacceptability of references to police officers in Northern Ireland as if they were somehow a legitimate target. One of the great achievements of the peace-building process in Northern Ireland has been the very difficult and controversial reform of the police service whereby young men and women from both Unionist and nationalist communities now serve gladly together, upholding law and justice in Northern Ireland. All of us in this House should continue to send every officer in the PSNI our full support.

Emily Thornberry: I agree entirely with the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Gentleman, but can I bring him back to the issue of the border? I agree with the ends he is trying to achieve, but the fundamental problem remains the means. We all know that his own party and the Democratic Unionist party will not accept the current backstop, but the only way the Government plan to avoid that backstop is by delivering a so-called invisible border. Last week, we saw a leaked Home Office presentation stating: “No government worldwide” currently has such a system in place; that current “realisation for a...technological solution in the UK is 2030”; and that there “is currently no budget for either a pilot or the programme itself.” Is the Home Office wrong?

Mr Lidington: I will not comment on alleged leaks from Government Departments, but I can tell the House that the Government have allocated £20 million to invest in work on alternative measures that would bring benefits in terms of seamless trade to the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and that, if successful, could be applied more generally to give us smart borders on all the United Kingdom’s external borders, and perhaps offer us some export opportunities for that technology as well.

Emily Thornberry: It is interesting what the Minister says, but the Home Office also says there are six problems with deploying these technological solutions: one, it is expensive and there is no budget; two, it has to operate with 28 different UK Government agencies; three, it needs to operate on both sides of the border; four, it will not be deliverable until 2030; five, the Government have a poor track record—to say the least—on big tech projects; and six, no one in the world has done anything similar. That is hardly a recipe for success.

The real answer to the Northern Ireland border question is staring the Government in the face. Twenty-eight months and two Brexit Secretaries ago, I told the Minister from this Dispatch Box that the only way to avoid a hard border was to stay in the customs union and to

align all rules and regulations. He himself said three years ago that for anyone to pretend otherwise “flies in the face of reality”.

That was the truth then, and it remains the truth today, so why will the Government not wake up to it?

Mr Lidington: I told the right hon. Lady in my previous answer that a £20 million budget had already been earmarked for this work. Whatever she may be reading in the newspapers about timetables, it is also the case that not just the United Kingdom but the European Union has committed itself to trying to get these alternative measures agreed by 2020. The European Commission has not entered into that undertaking and commitment lightly or without some thought and analysis of the chances of achieving it. The solution she identifies for a frictionless border on the island of Ireland would be delivered by the Government’s withdrawal agreement, so she should be urging her right hon. and hon. Friends to vote for the Government’s proposal, instead of rejecting it and therefore blocking the Brexit that her party’s manifesto commits her to.

Emily Thornberry: Let’s face it: we have heard it all before. The only point that the Minister did not make this time was that Britain must be able to establish her own international trade agreements. Perhaps he was listening to Nancy Pelosi last week, when she made it clear that if the UK Government disrupted the open border in Northern Ireland, we could forget all about a free trade deal with the United States.

So the Government are going to spend millions on giving Donald Trump the red-carpet, golden-carriage treatment in June. The state banquet might even be worth it, so long as he is forced to sit next to Greta Thunberg—or how about this? He could have Greta on one side and David Attenborough on the other. That would be three hours well spent. The truth is, however, that it will all be a giant waste of taxpayers’ money, because the US Congress will never agree to a trade deal unless we have a solution to the Irish border issue that will actually work, and this Government simply do not have one.

Mr Lidington: Just two short years ago, the right hon. Lady said that we should

“welcome the American President... We have to work with him.”

I wonder whether something has changed about the United States Administration or something has changed about the right hon. Lady’s own leadership ambitions to alter her words in this way.

I thought that both the Government and the Labour party wanted to see no tariffs, no quotas, no rules of origin checks and a seamless border on the island of Ireland, yet on three occasions the right hon. Lady and her colleagues have voted against a deal that would deliver those things to which they claim to be committed. It is about time that she put principle and the national interest ahead of party advantage.

Emily Thornberry: I think we will find that there is only one side of the House that is engaged in a leadership contest at the moment, and it is very active as we speak.

In a week like this, when we have all been shocked and saddened by horrific acts of terrorism at home and abroad, we remember that the first job of any Government is to keep our country and our citizens safe. Even before

our concerns about the economy, the main reason we need to keep an open border with Ireland is to preserve the peace and security on which millions of British and Irish citizens have come to depend, but which, in a week like this, seem to hang by a thread. If the Government are serious about putting the country first—the whole of our country—will the Minister accept that that means finally getting serious about the cross-party negotiations, and putting the option of a customs union on the table?

Mr Lidington: I appreciate that the right hon. Lady has not been in the room at times—I think she is now being described as being in the “outer inner circle” around the Labour leadership—but I can say to her that the substance and the tone of the conversations between the Government and Opposition teams have been constructive. I think that there is a genuine attempt to find a way through. However, I will not hide the fact that this is very difficult, because if it is going to work it will mean both parties making compromises and our ending up with a solution which, unlike any other proposed so far, will secure a majority in the House. So far, the House has rejected our deal; it has rejected the Opposition’s proposals; it has rejected a referendum; it has rejected revocation; it has rejected a customs union; and it has rejected common market 2.0.

This is not just a matter for the Government, or even for the Opposition Front Bench. It is a matter for every Member of the House to take our responsibilities to the country seriously, and to find a way in which to agree on an outcome that will enable us to deliver on the referendum result and take this country forward.

Q11. [910504] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): May I also associate myself with the sentiments so eloquently expressed by Members on both sides of the House?

Far from what some would have us believe, those of us who voted to leave knew exactly what we were voting for. We were voting to control our own borders, to spend our own money, to make our own laws, and to have those laws judged by our own judges. Labour’s policy now appears to be to hold a second referendum. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that on his watch and that of the Prime Minister, there will be no second referendum? Yes or no?

Mr Lidington: The Government are very clear indeed that we do not agree with a second referendum, and we have voted against a second referendum. All of us recall telling our electors in 2016 that their decision was going to be final and would be accepted, whatever the outcome of that referendum would be. I think it would do harm to the fragile confidence in our political institutions, were that commitment to be set aside.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Scottish National party joins in saying that we are horrified by the atrocious attacks in Sri Lanka. The Minister for the Cabinet Office is right to say that all of us, from all religions and none, should be considering religious tolerance and ensuring that we champion it. Also, as her funeral commences shortly, our thoughts are with the family and friends of Lyra McKee, and we would like to make it clear that we stand with Lyra. We would also like to join the celebration of Billy McNeill’s life and work. Of course, in addition to being the manager of Celtic, he was previously the manager of Aberdeen.

Climate change is the biggest crisis facing the world today. Even the Environment Secretary has admitted that this Government have failed to do enough. Yesterday, he promised that the UK Government would take action. This Government have spent millions on nuclear power, cut support for renewable energy projects and continued to pursue fracking. Does taking action include reversing those damaging policies?

Mr Lidington: As my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary said yesterday, there is clearly more that needs to be done. All of us who are of an age to be here would probably recognise that our generations have not done sufficient to meet this challenge, but I think the hon. Lady underestimates how much work has been done by the United Kingdom. Since 2010, we have reduced CO₂ emissions faster than any other G20 nation. Between 2010 and 2018, we reduced greenhouse gas emissions by about a quarter overall. Our renewable energy capacity has quadrupled since 2010, and the proportion of our electricity coming from low-carbon resources has increased from 19% to more than half in 2018, a record year for renewables. There is a lot more to do, but I think that that is a good record on which to base that future action.

Kirsty Blackman: I do not think that that answer recognises the scale of the challenge that we face. The Scottish Government have already brought forward a Climate Change Bill with some of the most ambitious statutory targets of any country in the world, with the aim of Scotland being carbon neutral by 2050. If we need to go further, we will. The UK Government commissioned new advice from the UK Committee on Climate Change on what the UK’s targets should be, and that advice is due next week. Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that when the advice is published next week, the UK Government will adopt the recommended targets immediately and in full?

Mr Lidington: I am going to wait to see what the advice is, and I am sure that the House could want to do that, as well as to learn from the Government directly what their decisions are going to be. Passing legislation can get us so far, but actually we need not just legislation but a change in attitudes and approach that runs right across society and industry. The UK has cut its emissions by 40% since 1990, but I am encouraged that in that same period our economy has grown by two thirds. Greater prosperity and green policies are not incompatible; they can and should be made to work together.

Q12. [910505] **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): May I associate myself with the words of those on the Front Benches?

To ensure that the British summer appetite for strawberries and Scottish raspberries is fulfilled, will my right hon. Friend encourage the Home Office to extend the seasonal agricultural workers scheme from 2,500 to 10,000 this year and to open it up to between 30,000 and 40,000 next year?

Mr Lidington: As I would have expected, my hon. Friend rightly champions both the produce of his constituency and the needs of businesses there. We have established a two-year pilot that provides for a six-month

scheme for non-EU migrants to work on UK farms. Although specifically designed to help the horticultural sector, the pilot was never designed to meet its full labour needs, so we will need to evaluate what happens in practice. However, the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be looking closely at the impact on the north-east of Scotland.

Q2. [910495] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): In 2015, when she was Home Secretary, the Prime Minister said that the Police Federation was crying wolf about the impact of police cuts. Now, teachers, specialist children and youth workers, and others are warning that Government cuts are making it harder to protect young people from knife crime. In my current constituency crime survey, many constituents are saying that cuts to services that support young people and to policing need to be reversed. Will the Minister for the Cabinet Office tell me whether he thinks that children and youth workers and my constituents are crying wolf, too?

Mr Lidington: The facts are that the Government have increased police funding by more than £970 million for the next year, and the Labour party voted against that increase when the order came before the House. However, the hon. Lady is right to say that this situation is not only about policing and new laws, but about early intervention. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has secured £220 million for early intervention projects to try to steer young people at risk of knife crime and other violent crime away from the gangs that can seduce them into that appalling way of life.

Q13. [910507] **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Passions, including my own, are running high about the devastating effects of climate change. While this Government have made great strides, including decarbonising faster than any other country in the G20, we must do more, faster and sooner, for a sustainable future. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Prime Minister to join me in supporting a cross-party call to achieve net zero emissions ahead of our current target of 2050? Almost 200 MPs have signed the letter that was instigated by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke). Will my right hon. Friend also ask the Prime Minister to meet me and other colleagues to discuss enshrining the proposal in law, as proposed by the forthcoming ten-minute rule Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk)?

Mr Lidington: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the way in which she has championed this and other environmental issues during her time in the House. I can certainly say that a Minister—I do not know whether it will be the Prime Minister—will be happy to see her and other parliamentary colleagues. I hope that she will understand that we will want to look at the advice of the independent Committee on Climate Change to understand what would be needed to achieve that net zero emissions target early and the practical steps that that would involve. However, I can assure her that we are investing more than £2.5 billion to support low-carbon

innovation in the UK over the next six years alone. Clean growth is a priority for the Government and will remain so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am afraid that we have managed to get through only 13 questions in more than 25 minutes. We need to speed up, because I wish to accommodate the Back-Bench Members who are patiently waiting to put their inquiries.

Q3. [910496] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The proposed closure of Cumbernauld tax office will see 1,300 good-quality jobs lost to the town, with many others under threat as millions of pounds of spending disappear from the local economy. That is just one of over 150 tax office closures being overseen by the Treasury. If the Government genuinely want to build stronger towns and are concerned about towns like Cumbernauld, surely they must now put a stop to HMRC's damaging tax office closures.

Mr Lidington: I completely understand the concern, particularly among hard-working civil servants in Cumbernauld who expected to be reassigned. There is now a difference in the way in which citizens choose to interact with HMRC, with fewer people wanting or needing to access an office and more people being willing and choosing to work with the taxman online, which is clearly going to have implications. It seems to me that the priority has to be to maintain a high quality of service for businesses and individual taxpayers.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The Minister will be aware of the wildfires burning across the country, including one in Moray that started near Knockando on Monday and continues despite the efforts of more than 50 firefighters. Will he join me in congratulating and praising incident commander Bruce Farquharson, all the teams involved and the other emergency services that have made this a multi-agency response? Will he also urge people to assist the fire service by keeping away from the area to allow the dedicated and committed firefighters to bring this blaze under control?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to endorse my hon. Friend's tribute to the fire and rescue service in his constituency and to support his words encouraging members of the public to co-operate fully with those services.

Q4. [910497] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is it the Government's intention to bring forward a withdrawal agreement implementation Bill and to prorogue Parliament if they lose on Second Reading? Would it not, in fact, be far safer for the Government simply to link the Prime Minister's deal to a people's vote and to bring that forward to Parliament?

Mr Lidington: The problem with that proposal is that, so far, whenever the idea of a second referendum has been brought before the House there has been a majority against it. I do not think the right hon. Gentleman's proposal would actually deliver the outcome he seeks.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I associate myself with the remarks about Sri Lanka. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House whether he thinks it likely that we will leave the European Union by 22 May? Does he

agree with me that both the major political parties are likely to suffer at the polls if we do not? What does it say to my Leicestershire constituents about the democratic process if this House cannot get the withdrawal agreement to leave the European Union over the line?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand and share the sense of exasperation that my hon. Friend expresses. It has been made very clear from this Dispatch Box on several occasions that the consequence of the House voting to reject the withdrawal agreement and in favour of an extension is that the Government would need to make preparations, as required by law, for those European elections. The way in which we solve this problem is for Parliament to assemble a majority behind a deal, to vote for it, to get the legislation through and to give effect to our departure from the EU.

Q6. [910499] **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Having experienced their average salary fall by over £2,000 a year since 2010, and expecting just a 1% pay rise this year, civil servants in the Public and Commercial Services Union are rightly being balloted for industrial action. Will the Minister tell the House when these civil servants will be free of austerity measures and receive a substantial pay rise, which is long overdue?

Mr Lidington: There has been, because of the scale of the deficit that was inherited in 2010, a need for severe restraints on public expenditure, including public sector pay. Where we are today is that there is flexibility within the overall pay ceiling, Department by Department, for Departments to negotiate arrangements with their workforces that permit higher wage increases than the ones to which the hon. Lady refers.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On Sunday, more than 40,000 people will take part in the London marathon. Many of them will be supporting the dementia revolution on behalf of Alzheimer's Research UK and the Alzheimer's Society, and some of them are sitting on the Government Benches. The UK is the world leader in dementia research. I visited the Dementia Research Institute with members of the Science and Technology Committee today. Will the Government continue to support dementia research, encourage more people—especially those in their 30s, 40s and 50s—to take part in research trials, and wish the very best of luck to everyone in the marathon on Sunday?

Mr Lidington: I join my hon. Friend in wishing success and strength to everybody taking part in the marathon on Sunday, particularly to Members from all parts of the House and, I suspect, one or two people in the Press Gallery as well. My hon. Friend makes an important point about dementia. One of the welcome changes we are seeing is that as a society we are more open about the fact that many of us will live with dementia at some stage in our lives. The Government commitment to which she referred, to dementia research and to trying to remove the stigma from dementia, will be maintained.

Mr Speaker: At the last count, I was aware of no fewer than 16 hon. and right hon. Members of the House intending to take part in the London marathon, including the Secretary of State for Wales and the hon.

Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), from whom we heard earlier, but who was too modest or self-effacing to mention her prospective involvement.

Q7. [910500] **Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): I do not think I could run the London marathon, Mr Speaker, so you need not include me in that.

While the McKee family today bury their daughter, who was murdered by IRA terrorists, hundreds of people in Sri Lanka are burying their loved ones who were brutally murdered because of their faith. Christians across the world are now the most persecuted religious group, with nearly 300 million living in fear of discrimination and persecution, and 4,000 being killed every year because of their faith. The Government have said that Britain is on their side. How are the Government using the UK's soft power, economic power, contacts with other Governments and aid budget to help those who are persecuted daily simply because they believe in Jesus Christ?

Mr Lidington: The aid budget and the Foreign Office diplomatic expenditure budget give, and will continue to give, priority to human rights, including the rights of Christians and people of other faiths. The right hon. Gentleman is quite correct in saying that in many countries Christians face persecution and discrimination. We work to try to improve standards of justice and civil rights in those countries, and we work with Christian and other religious communities who are under threat. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has recently commissioned a review of our work to help persecuted Christians overseas, to make sure that we are focusing the right degree of resource and effort on delivering the improvements in outcome that the right hon. Gentleman quite rightly seeks.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Current immigration requirements oblige Commonwealth servicemen and women to pay £2,389 to apply for indefinite leave to remain after four years' service, or almost £10,000 for a family of four. That considerable cost does not reflect the nation's respect for those who are prepared, in extremis, to give their lives for our country. I have therefore written a cross-party letter with the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), signed by 130 Members of Parliament, to the Home Secretary to seek his support to abolish these visa fees. At a time when the UK is chair of the Commonwealth, will my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister give their support to this great non-party political cause, which is supported by the Royal British Legion?

Mr Lidington: I want to pay tribute to men and women from Commonwealth countries who serve in our armed services. That service is something that this and previous Governments have valued enormously. On the particular point that my hon. Friend makes about immigration requirements, I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will take very seriously, and look very carefully at, the representations that my hon. Friend is making.

Q8. [910501] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): When last month a football referee in Nottinghamshire had to flee a game, lock himself in the car and call the police, the Football Association responded with a six-match

ban and a £50 fine. If we bear in mind what is happening to Raheem Sterling and Danny Rose, who have called for a national forum, and the growth of racism at every level in football, is it not clear that without our help and Government help the football authorities are not capable of getting on top of the problem of racism in football? Will the Government take a lead, just as the Prime Minister did on Hillsborough, and help to convene, using their auspices, such a forum as Mr Sterling and others have requested this summer? Perhaps, Mr Speaker, you might offer this location as an appropriate venue for such a forum.

Mr Lidington: Every Member of this House will condemn without reservation the behaviour to which the hon. Gentleman referred; it should be regarded as completely beyond the bounds of acceptability in our society. My hon. Friend the Sport Minister will want to sit down with the hon. Gentleman and any other colleagues in the House who make this issue a priority, to discuss what more might be done.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Yesterday, Jane Golding, who chairs British in Europe, which represents more than 1.3 million British nationals in the EU27, reminded me that Michel Barnier's letter in response to the House's requirement that we carve out the citizens' rights element of the withdrawal agreement is almost one month old. Given the absence of the passage of a withdrawal agreement, will my right hon. Friend inform the House of what actions the Government have taken since they received Michel Barnier's letter?

Mr Lidington: As I recall, my hon. Friend was successful in seeking that the Government should make representations to the European Commission to ask it to carve the citizens' rights elements out of the overall withdrawal agreement. There are legal problems with that, in that the withdrawal agreement stands together as a package, and as a package has been submitted to the European Parliament, having been formally and legally approved by the European Council. To separate elements of the agreement might therefore mean having to go through those European procedures again, assuming the political willingness to do so were there. I will ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to speak urgently to my hon. Friend to update him on where we are on the issue.

Q9. [910502] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is complacent to claim that we are on target to meet our climate change obligations when emissions from air freight and the shipping of imports and exports are excluded from the figures. Will the Government be honest about the scale of the challenge of climate change? We need to invest fully in renewable energy, drop the fascination with fracking and declare a climate change emergency, because that is the reality of what we face.

Mr Lidington: The rules on emissions from shipping are not unique to the United Kingdom: the standards of measurement are global. As I said in earlier exchanges, the Government are the first to say that more needs to be done, but the hon. Gentleman does us an injustice in not acknowledging that we have a better track record on this issue than any other member of the G7. He asked

about investment: our annual support for renewables will be more than £10 billion by 2021. We have opened the world's largest offshore wind farm, which is capable of powering 600,000 homes, and the world's first ever floating offshore wind farm. Some 99% of the solar power we have in the UK has been deployed since 2010. That is a good track record.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Do the Government accept that the telecommunications firm Huawei is intimately linked with the Chinese communist Government and their deeply hostile intelligence services?

Mr Lidington: Legally speaking, Huawei is a private firm, not a Government-owned company, but my right hon. Friend takes us to the question about the proposed roll-out of 5G networks. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has commissioned a wide-ranging and thorough review of this matter. We are giving priority to stronger cyber-security practice across the entire telecommunications sector, greater resilience in telecommunications networks and, critically, diversity in the entire 5G supply chain, because this question goes beyond any single company. When we have taken decisions about that review, we will announce them to the House in the proper way.

Mr Speaker: Knowing the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) as I do, I think the Minister will have to recognise that he will probably hear from him on this matter a few hundred more times in the coming weeks.

Q10. [910503] **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): The Government continue to chronically underfund the Welsh railway network with planned spending running at 6% despite its having 11% of the network. Will the Minister set out when the Government will start investing in Welsh railway infrastructure and give Welsh commuters the investment that they deserve?

Mr Lidington: We are investing record amounts in Wales's railway infrastructure. Network Rail investment in the Wales route for control period 6, which takes us up to 2024, will be more than £1.5 billion. It will deliver improved journeys for passengers in Wales on the most advanced new trains. In south Wales, passengers and commuters are already experiencing real improvements thanks to the new Intercity express trains, each of which have 130 extra seats compared with the typical high-speed train. I really wish that the hon. Gentleman had paid tribute to that achievement, rather than carping.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I will, if I may, add a few words of tribute of my own to Billy McNeill, who was a childhood hero of mine and a truly legendary Celt. His family have described his brave struggle with dementia—a subject reminiscent of the question that was asked earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). My own mother passed away earlier this year owing to the effects of dementia. Scottish universities are doing world-leading research into the prevention of dementia and they currently receive about £100 million of funding each year from the European Union. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that funding will be maintained and that this research will be protected as we leave the European Union?

Mr Lidington: If we get the implementation period that is envisaged by the withdrawal agreement then those funding arrangements will continue until the end of that period. At that point, there will need to be decisions by Government as a whole about their spending priorities, including on medical research, but, as I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), the Government's commitment to dementia research and to ending the stigma of dementia is something that will continue.

Q14. [910508] **Danielle Rowley** (Midlothian) (Lab): Average wages have been stagnating for more than a decade, in-work poverty is rising faster than employment, and we are hurtling towards a climate disaster. What a mess, Mr Speaker! In Midlothian, enterprising renewable firms and organisations are doing sector-leading work and providing good jobs, but they tell me that they are not getting enough support from the Government. The Minister has boasted about renewables in this session, but will he recognise that that is not enough and say what more he and the Government will do to support leading work on renewables in my constituency?

Mr Lidington: What we are seeing in this country is not only the £10 billion that I spoke about in the earlier exchange, but enterprising innovative companies—large and small—seizing the opportunities of developing green technology and renewable energy technology in a way that will take advantage not just of the change in the domestic market, but of that growing export market globally as well. Through their industrial strategy, the Government will continue to work for green growth, and I hope very much that businesses in Midlothian and elsewhere in the UK will benefit from that.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): At the most recent indicative votes, the Opposition did move one of their key red lines and supported a proposal that did not specify a permanent customs union. In fact, they supported customs arrangements—a temporary customs union followed by alternative arrangements. Now that the Government and Opposition are virtually on the same page, is it not time to put party politics to one side and agree a deal in the national interest?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As we look to the future relationship with the European Union, we are looking at the customs

arrangement that would be in place as part of that future relationship. We have already indicated—as reflected in the existing text of the political declaration—that we want to retain the benefits of a customs union, with no tariffs, no quotas and no rules of origin checks. We remain focused on agreeing an approach that delivers on the result of the referendum, which was for the UK to leave. I hope that it would be possible to bring Members from all parties of the House together in support of a customs arrangement as part of a wider approach to our future relationship with the European Union that enables us to get on with this task in the way in which the British people expect.

Mr Speaker: Finally, patience rewarded—Mr Nigel Dodds.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Let me go back to the subject that the Minister started this session with. In a few minutes, the funeral of Lyra McKee will begin in Belfast. The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are both there, and rightly so. We extend our deepest sympathies to Lyra's partner Sara, and to her family and friends, at this terrible time. The message across Northern Ireland is that violence is not acceptable and will never succeed; it has never been acceptable and it never will be. Does the Minister agree that it was an utterly repulsive statement from those who carried out this terrible atrocity that, somehow, the murder of police officers is totally legitimate and it was just an accident that Lyra was killed? In standing with Lyra today, we stand with everyone—journalists, police officers and all who serve the community in Northern Ireland. An attack on any one of them is an attack on us all.

Mr Lidington: I agree with every word that the right hon. Gentleman just said. I thought that the finest riposte to those sickening claims by the terrorists was that the leaders of both the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin came together, there in the Creggan estate in Derry, and put aside the real differences between them to reject the path towards violence and terror—the joint statement by all party leaders in Northern Ireland rejecting terrorism. The visible expressions of grief and anger towards the terrorists by the communities both of nationalists and of Unionists in the city of Derry/Londonderry has been a visible riposte—but also the most compelling and moving one—to the evil claims of those behind that terrorist act. Those political leaders and communities in Derry spoke for the reality and for the heart of the people of Northern Ireland.

Saudi Arabia: Mass Executions

12.53 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office if he will make a statement on what representations he has made to the Saudi Government with respect to the mass execution of 37 people yesterday.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): We are very concerned by the executions of 37 men in Saudi Arabia, and the Foreign Office is working to establish the full facts. The Foreign Secretary will be raising this matter with the Saudi authorities at the earliest opportunity. The UK Government oppose the death penalty in all circumstances and in every country, including in Saudi Arabia. We regularly raise human rights concerns, including the use of the death penalty, at the highest levels with the Saudi Arabian authorities.

Sir Vince Cable: May I ask the Minister specifically what representations were made in respect of the 12 condemned men I referred to the Prime Minister's attention on 3 December, including Abbas al-Hassan, who was executed yesterday?

Does the Minister recall his predecessor's statement on 7 March 2018 that the Foreign Office was

"concerned with those cases where minors might have been indicted"—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 319.]

but that he had received assurances on that matter? Is the Minister now aware of the fact that three of the executed people, and possibly more, were indeed juveniles, and that in most of these cases—again, in flagrant disregard for international law—most appear to have been tortured prior to the extraction of confessions? Does he acknowledge that there have been around 100 executions so far this year and that, according to the campaigning group Reprieve, Saudi Arabia is on track to execute 300 people by the end of this year? Will the Minister agree to meet me and representatives of Reprieve to go through the list of condemned people and see how representations could most effectively be made?

Finally, does he accept that Britain's moral position on this issue is somewhat compromised by the continued supply of arms, fuelling atrocities in the civil war in Yemen, and that we are in urgent need of a reappraisal of our relationship with Saudi Arabia, given that the continued medieval barbarism of the regime does not constitute the basis for a friendly alliance, and indeed makes it an enemy of our values and our human rights?

Sir Alan Duncan: I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman that this situation does raise the gravest imaginable concerns. Executing 37 people is a deeply backwards step, which we deplore. In response to the specific question about representations that have been made in the past, I can confirm that British embassy representatives in Riyadh did make representations regarding specific individuals last November.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to point out that one of the grave concerns about these executions is that they would appear to include minors, or those who were minors at the time that the charges were made. This is of course totally unacceptable and we deplore it. I can

advise the House that in just the last few minutes, the European Union—and we have put our name fully to this—has issued a very strong statement of condemnation through the European External Action Service, pointing out that these executions are a regressive step and specifically raising concerns that some of the 37 people executed were minors.

I fully appreciate what the right hon. Gentleman is saying regarding our arms exports. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia faces a number of threats; the issue of arms is not just about using arms in Yemen. We ensure that any arms exports fully comply with the consolidated criteria that govern any such sales.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I share the sentiments expressed by my right hon. Friend at the Dispatch Box. The security and stability of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia matters a great deal in the region, and is indeed the basis of our relationship. Notwithstanding our shared concerns with regards to terror, will my right hon. Friend confirm that we do everything we can to use our influence to impress upon the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that that relationship carries with it obligations? When he and the House express themselves in such strong terms, there is usually a very good reason why those concerns are being expressed, and they should be listened to.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for what he has said. He speaks with the utmost authority in this House and was an excellent Minister for the Middle East; I have to say that, at a moment like this, I rather wish that he still was. I can say in all honesty that, despite always being polite, he never held back from telling his counterparts in Saudi Arabia where he thought they were making mistakes and where he thought their record on human rights fell short. It is by having access of that sort and having trusted Ministers on our side that we can best get that message over—and I hope, over time, make a difference.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): As we have heard, yesterday saw the largest mass execution in Saudi Arabia since January 2016, in which 37 people were killed. According to the official Saudi press agency, the men were executed:

"for adopting terrorist and extremist thinking and for forming terrorist cells to corrupt and destabilise security".

They were arrested after four Islamic State gunmen attacked a Saudi security compound in Riyadh, but the Saudi authorities have still not made clear whether those arrested were linked to the attacks.

Publicly pinning one of the headless bodies to a pole as a warning is not only disturbingly barbaric and medieval in nature, but an abhorrent violation of human rights. According to the families of those executed, there was no prior notice that the executions would be carried out. That is a blatant flouting of international standards set out by even the most brutal of regimes that still use the death penalty. We know that some, if not all, of those executed were convicted in Saudi Arabia's Specialised Criminal Court, which has been widely condemned by human rights groups as secretive, and which has in the past been used to try human rights activists, whom the state often wrongly regards as terrorists.

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

We also know that at least three of those executed were juveniles—a clear violation of international law, which the Saudi regime appears to care very little about. Abdulkarim al-Hawaj was charged with participating in demonstrations, incitement via social media and preparing banners with anti-state slogans. Reports from human rights watchdogs in the country claim that he was beaten and the so-called confessions extracted from him through various means of torture. Mujtaba al-Sweikat was a student about to begin his studies at Western Michigan University when he was arrested at King Fahd airport, beaten and so-called confessions extracted through torture. Salman Qureish was just 18 when he was executed, but he was convicted of crimes that allegedly took place when he was still a child. The UN has condemned his sentencing and the use of the death penalty against him after he was denied basic legal rights, such as access to a lawyer.

Saudi Arabia has executed more than 100 people already this year. If it continues, the number of executions this year alone will reach over 300. Human rights group Reprieve says that five of the prisoners it supported were executed yesterday. Many were forced to stand in stress positions for hours and deprived of sleep until a confession was extracted.

These executions have caused a breakdown in Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran and have the potential to destabilise the region further, so what discussions has the Minister had with his Saudi counterpart since the executions took place? Will the Government condemn the use of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia today? Will the Government call for an immediate end to executions in Saudi Arabia? Finally, what plans do the Government have to tackle the use of violence against human rights activists in Saudi Arabia?

Mr Speaker: I yield to none in my affection and admiration for the hon. Gentleman, but he is fortunate that I am in a generous mood. I note in passing that he was due to speak for two minutes, spoke for a little over three, and the first of his four questions was posed after three minutes and one second. It was a volley of unsurpassable eloquence, but it was a tad too long.

Sir Alan Duncan: I take that as you instructing me to be suitably short, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman and I share in common a characteristic of being short, and we have done so for some decades, as he knows.

Sir Alan Duncan: I will happily confirm that you always win, but I will not say in which direction I am pointing, Mr Speaker.

I do not think anyone in this House would disagree with what the hon. Member for Leeds North East (*Fabian Hamilton*) has said. All Members want to defend human rights, and we abhor executions of this sort. We really do genuinely disapprove in the strongest possible terms of what has happened, particularly when it is reported that one of those executed was displayed on a cross—something that anyone in this House just a few days after Easter will find more repulsive than anything we could have pictured.

We have to be sure of our facts, however. We need to find out directly what precisely were the supposed crimes and what was the due process used. Although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can legitimately use its law to bear down on genuine extremist threats, its Government must appreciate that there will be growing international pressure on them to accept that the sort of action we are discussing is utterly unacceptable in the modern world. It does them no credit and it does not support the basis of law that any proper country should be working on.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I have worked with the hon. Members for Stockton South (*Dr Williams*) and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (*Layla Moran*) on a detention review panel of the female human rights activists in Saudi Arabia. Does my right hon. Friend accept that these executions and the accelerating pace of executions in Saudi Arabia cannot be seen in isolation from the wider criminal justice policy—if that is what one should call it—that relates to the murder of *Jamal Khashoggi* and the detention of civil society activists in Saudi Arabia? If Saudi Arabian civil society space is closed down as it has been, the security and stability of the country, which is after all our ally, will be the victim.

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend makes a serious point: any country needs to realise that using such methods will eventually backfire. Although I think there are greater arguments for pointing out how unacceptable such methods are, rulers are wise to be mindful of such dangers.

I did not answer the question put by the hon. Member for Leeds North East about human rights defenders. Yes, we will raise the issue of freedom and protection for those who defend human rights. It is not acceptable to attack non-governmental organisations when what they are doing is trying to defend justice.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (*Sir Vince Cable*) for securing this urgent question.

We are here to discuss yet more appalling human rights violations. There is huge concern about this latest mass execution. Not only is it reported that a number of those executed were from the Shi'a minority, but, critically, and as has been pointed out, a number of those put to death were minors at the time of the alleged crimes.

We have been here rather frequently to discuss human rights violations, what is happening in Yemen, the murder of *Mr Khashoggi*, and so on. The issues are raised, and when we talk about arms sales and our relations with Saudi Arabia we are told that we have influence, but it is difficult to see that influence at the moment. Does the Minister agree that we must reassess the relationship with Saudi Arabia? Also, instead of us coming back time after time to discuss more issues of concern, will the right hon. Gentleman commit to returning to the House to tell us what has been done about that reassessment?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will be discussing this with the Foreign Secretary, and he will be calling his counterpart, the relatively new Foreign Minister in Saudi Arabia. The hon. Gentleman makes a serious point that we should all take on board: the broader picture gives growing cause for concern. We can look at those who have been executed and their number—Shi'a, minors

and those whose crimes we do not know, as well as the Khashoggi incident—and I am sure that we will be robust in our embassy and Minister-to-Minister representations. It is important that the regime in Saudi Arabia appreciates that the voice of world opinion can only get louder in its condemnation.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): The King of Saudi Arabia is reported as being interested in ensuring that there is prison reform in his kingdom. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that prison conditions will be on the agenda next time he raises human rights with the Saudis?

Sir Alan Duncan: This is an important agenda. When I was a Minister at the Department for International Development, I always wanted prison visiting and access to be a condition of any aid that we gave to a country, although I did not exactly succeed in my objective. My hon. Friend illustrates the important point that when people are hidden and no one can get to them, we do not know what is going on. The ability for decent people to inspect prisons and visit prisoners, as is the case in this country, is a very important aspect of any judicial system and the human rights that ought to go alongside it.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Saudi Arabia is now one of the world's top executioners, behind only China and Iran. Amnesty International called the recent executions "a chilling demonstration of the Saudi Arabian authorities' callous disregard for human life. It is also yet another gruesome indication of how the death penalty is being used as a political tool to crush dissent from within the country's Shi'a minority."

These Shi'a men apparently were convicted after sham trials that involved torture. We must condemn this in the strongest possible terms and take some kind of action. Words are easy, but the UK must give a direct indication that we will not put up with this kind of thing.

Sir Alan Duncan: No one can question the right hon. Lady's track record on defending human rights. We hear loudly what she says. One of the questions we need to ask the Saudi Government is what on earth they think this will achieve. The practical benefit seems entirely negative, and I hope that the rational argument that the death penalty achieves nothing in the modern world will eventually sink in.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Minister feel, as I do, that the feebleness of the response to the Khashoggi murder and the butchering of his body has in some way encouraged the Saudi authorities to think they can get away with anything, no matter how brutal and borderline insane?

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not quite agree with my right hon. Friend. The international reaction was pretty robust, and a collective voice condemned it, led by Turkey, where it happened. I would like to think that that incident had a dividend and it got through to people that it was unacceptable, and they were taken aback by the fact that the murder of one person counted for so much elsewhere in the world. I hope it will never be repeated.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Three more juveniles who were arrested after the Arab spring for peaceful protest—Dawood al-Marhoon, Ali al-Nimr

and Abdullah Hasan al-Zaher—have gone through the same process and are on death row awaiting execution by beheading, which could happen at any time with no notice. Will the Government make specific representations for those three? Otherwise, we will see more executions as the year progresses.

Sir Alan Duncan: These 37 executions will spur us to take a deep interest in not only the general concept and principle of the death penalty but individual cases. Given the robustness of the statement just issued by the European Union, I am confident that we will not be alone in making our opinions clear.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can we have a measure of repentance about the enthusiasm with which we sponsored Saudi Arabia for the United Nations Human Rights Council?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am always happy to be repentant to my right hon. Friend. I am not familiar with the exact details of what he refers to, but I maintain the position that we will make our views on these issues clear in a very robust way to the Saudi Government.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I remind the House that I chair the all-party parliamentary British-Qatar group and am an officer of the all-party group on Kuwait, so I hope the Minister will accept that he does not need to persuade me of the importance of creating good relations with our friends in the Gulf. But when I read about the use of not only capital punishment but torture to obtain confessions, on the basis of which the executions were carried out—including the torture of Munir al-Adam, who was beaten so badly that he lost his hearing in one ear—I find myself asking, why do the Government of my country want to regard these people as our friends? Surely this is the time for a fundamental reappraisal of our relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Sir Alan Duncan: We unreservedly condemn torture in all circumstances. I understand what the right hon. Gentleman is asking for. We have to look at the broader picture of the entire Gulf and the dangers around it. That is always taken into consideration when looking at who we work with across the world.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I know how much my right hon. Friend cares and how hard he works on these matters of human rights. The European Union has also condemned what is happening. Can we ensure that this is not just the ritual condemnation that happens immediately after an event and then is forgotten, but that at every opportunity in his dialogue with Saudi counterparts, he stresses the value that this country and our European partners place on freedom, human rights, religious freedom and all those areas that would be of great benefit to Saudi Arabia if it were to embrace them?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend is right. It is no good just having a day's anger after an event such as this. It has to be persistent and consistent, and the condemnation of executions of this sort and any abuse of human rights has to be built into our policy and actions at all time.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Human rights abuses, executions, airstrikes in Yemen killing 100 in March alone, including 19 children—if the Saudis continue to fail to listen to the Minister's pleading, why does he extend to them the veneer of respectability?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady mentions Yemen. I have spent many decades taking an interest in Yemen. I hope we will now see some progress towards a political settlement. We have to give our full support to Martin Griffiths, our UN representative. Part of the message we have to send to the Saudi Government is that bombings in Yemen do not achieve any of the objectives they have set out to achieve, and we need a political settlement as a matter of urgency.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that this country does not pursue trade at the expense of human rights?

Sir Alan Duncan: I can give that assurance. We obviously want to defend human rights everywhere, and we want to maximise our trade, but we will not pursue a trade opportunity at the expense of human rights.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is difficult to fathom the logic of such senseless barbarism in Saudi Arabia's policies, and this has wider implications, particularly in relation to Iran and the geopolitical stability of the middle east. At what point will this country's commercial and geopolitical interests come second to the need to demonstrate moral courage and real economic consequences of Saudi Arabia's continued behaviour?

Sir Alan Duncan: We value our trade with Saudi Arabia, as we do with all partners in the Gulf, but we have to ensure that such commercial activity goes hand in hand with the robust political messages that we all send in this House today.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) said, the vast majority of those executed yesterday were Shi'a Muslims. To what degree do the British Government consider that the Saudi regime is using the death penalty as a means of quashing dissent among a persecuted religious minority within its borders?

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not think that this is the moment for me to give an extended thesis on such matters, but I understand the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. In many parts of the middle east, the Sunni-Shi'a conflict is very intensive and creates enormous tension, difficulty and strife. I very much hope that in the years ahead, we will see the temperature settle and good relations between Sunni and Shi'a communities everywhere.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What more could the Government do through the embassy in Saudi Arabia to work with civil society, women's groups in particular and human rights defenders to ensure that human rights are upheld in the kingdom?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this point. As a Government, we tend to attend internationally important trials in all countries, where

of course it is permitted by the host Government. We have been denied access to trials in certain circumstances in Saudi Arabia. I think that defending human rights activists and NGOs is very important. To that end, our embassy is very active, and some of its engagement with the Government may not be popular with them, but that is what our embassies should be doing. They are defending justice, decency and human rights, and that is what our foreign policy is designed to do.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): These men could not have been convicted in any court worthy of the name, because a conviction that relies on evidence obtained through torture is no conviction. In the eyes of any law, these men were innocent: they were not executed; they were murdered for dissenting from the policies of the dictatorship that runs the country.

The Minister has listed a lot of things the Government have done previously that have made no difference. If anything, Saudi Arabia is going in the wrong direction. He has ruled out a fundamental rethink of our relationship with Saudi Arabia, and he has ruled out a fundamental rethink of our multibillion-pound arms trade with Saudi Arabia. Will the Minister tell us what else is left that the Government have not already tried, and which has failed to persuade these people that the regime does not belong in the 21st century?

Sir Alan Duncan: First, we do have to be certain about establishing the facts in these cases. I know that a lot of suggestions have been made about many things that may have happened with the 37, but before we speak with the authority of Government, we do very much feel obliged to establish all the facts first and to engage with the Saudi Government in doing so. On what can be done, I again go back to the point about growing international pressure. I hope that, by acting in concert with other countries, we can, perhaps on the back of these executions, make a difference to future policy and behaviour in the kingdom.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): This is an ally whose behaviour is as bad, if not worse, than most of the regimes around the globe that we would regard as hostile. I guess that ordinary constituents listening to this and reacting to the barbarism will want to know whether there is a bottom line. Is there a point at which this becomes a friendship not worth having?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that there is a moral dilemma here. Moral dilemmas are never a choice between black and white; they are a choice between different shades of grey, and there is deep murkiness here that we do not like. I hear exactly what the hon. Gentleman says, and we will continue to make the points and keep up the pressure I have been describing today.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Amnesty International has said that there was a welcome reduction last year in the number of executions worldwide, but clearly what Saudi Arabia is doing is going in the opposite direction. The worst offenders are China with more than 1,000, Iran with several hundred, and then Saudi, Vietnam and Iraq. What steps can we take internationally, in the UN and elsewhere, to get back to the good trend of a reduction in the number of executions?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the trend has been thrown into reverse gear. That is what the EU statement today says specifically in respect of Saudi Arabia. We do not just want the trajectory to be going downwards; we want it to be down at zero. That is our ambition and I hope, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, that the UN can play its part in making a resounding noise of condemnation in relation to those who use the death penalty in any circumstances.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): While it is always a pleasure to see the Minister at the Dispatch Box, it really is nonsense that the Prime Minister has not been able to replace the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) in such a key role for the Government at this time.

These reports are highly distressing. Does the Minister agree, however, that the UK will undermine its efforts to persuade our security allies such as Saudi Arabia to reform this draconian justice system if it does not itself apply the fundamental values of British liberty and fair due process to its own citizens, even those—perhaps particularly those—who have been radicalised in the UK and have gone abroad to commit terrorist acts in other countries? Should they not be brought back here to be tried, rather than be subjected to a judicial process way below the standards we would accept here in the UK?

Sir Alan Duncan: I accept that we are one Minister down in the Foreign Office at the moment, and that may well be because my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) is in fact irreplaceable.

On due process, the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that this is straying slightly from the focus of this urgent question, but when someone is subject to the law and the process of the courts in the UK, I think we can be proud of our judicial system and the fairness it contains.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his very helpful responses. The Minister will know that Saudi Arabia has a death penalty in law for those who convert from Islam to Christianity. Freedom of religious belief has been very much in the minds of all of us in this House—including the Minister, I know—and of those outside this House as well. The death penalty for someone pursuing their religious belief and conviction is unbelievable in this day and age, especially in the light of the murderous intent of those against Christians in Sri Lanka. What discussions has the Minister had with the Saudi Arabian Government about removing the death penalty for changing religion?

Sir Alan Duncan: Our objective is for the Saudi Arabian Government to remove the death penalty for absolutely everything. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made very clear statements in defence of religious freedom everywhere, particularly in defence of Christians, who are increasingly being persecuted across the world. As the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, the atrocities in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday were, to a large extent, against Christians who were worshipping on Easter Day. I hope that the voice of the Foreign Office and the application of our foreign policy will be to defend human rights, religious freedom and—as my right hon. Friend has said as well, and importantly—media freedom.

Speaker's Statement

1.27 pm

Mr Speaker: I have received a communication this afternoon from Southwark Crown court informing me that Chris Davies, the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, has been convicted of providing false or misleading information for a parliamentary allowances claim. Since Mr Davies pleaded guilty, there can be no appeal against conviction. This notification accordingly triggers the provisions of the Recall of MPs Act 2015, and I will accordingly be writing to the relevant petition officer to inform that person that Chris Davies is therefore subject to a recall petition process. It will be for that officer to make the arrangements for the petition.

Gambling (Industry Levy Review and Protections for Vulnerable People)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.28 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a review of the case for a levy on the gross revenues of gambling firms and to require that review to make recommendations on the possible uses of revenue from such a levy in connection with research on gambling addiction, protections for children and other vulnerable people at risk of being harmed by gambling, and gambling addiction clinics; and for connected purposes.

There is very little, if anything, more important for MPs to do than supporting and protecting the most vulnerable in our nation. Typically, that is reflected in the huge amount of our public spending rightly spent on welfare and pensions, in using science and technology for remarkable solutions to health issues, including mental health issues, and in much greater awareness of and legislation against hatred and prejudices of all kinds. This Bill, however, aims to help with a different sort of vulnerability—that resulting from the increasing amount of addiction to gambling, which, in extreme circumstances, has led, and does lead, to suicide. There is nothing more sad than meeting a constituent, or non-constituent, who has lost a child to suicide as a result of the pressures of gambling debts. Even one life destroyed by gambling is too many. The depressing thing is that we simply do not know how many people have committed suicide as a result of gambling.

The only statistics available suggest that last year, between 250 and 650 gamblers committed suicide. I know of at least one case where the family ensured that gambling was not the reason given at the inquest. For how many more is that true? What is the real figure of suicide gamblers? Whether it is 250 or 650, it surely tells us forcefully that the assumptions in the Gambling Act 2005 about gambling being harmless for the vast majority of people need to be challenged; that existing protections are not working as they should; and that we—Government, Parliament, the regulator, the gambling sector, charities, us as a society—need to do a lot more to protect those vulnerable to gambling addiction.

This is urgent, because the problem is getting worse. More than 55,000 young people under the age of 14 are already addicted—a figure up sharply on even two years ago and rising fast. That is alongside 430,000 adults with a serious gambling issue—what we would in normal English call addicts—and 2 million at risk. That, above all, is why I seek leave today to bring in a Bill to ask the Government to review the case for a levy. I cannot in a ten-minute rule Bill ask directly for a specific levy, although as Simon and Garfunkel once put it, if I could, I surely would.

The main aim of such a levy would be to research what causes gambling addiction. How does it start? Who is it most likely to impact? Who is most vulnerable? How can we spot the signs, and what can we do to prevent it? Although prevention is always better than cure, what more can we do through gambling clinics and other means to help those already addicted? What

can we learn from those who have almost become addicted and pulled back successfully, on their own or with help?

This needs immediate and deep investment in research to analyse the extent of gambling addiction, including looking at all aspects of marketing and advertising by gambling companies. The chair of the regulator, the Gambling Commission, has said that

“problem gambling has a real cost to the economy and to the individuals and families affected by it, although the scale of the adverse impact is currently poorly understood.”

That is a huge understatement. The damage done not just to individual lives but to families and friends, with strains on relationships, marriages, jobs and mental health, is already considerable and getting worse.

Let me say something about a potential levy on gambling company gross profits. The industry’s gross profits of £14 billion, tax receipts of £3 billion, 100,000 employees and £200 million of advertising revenues give an idea of the volume of gambling. Although the regulator requires a voluntary contribution, the current amount raised—£9 million a year—is tiny compared with the size of the industry. A reasonable levy could generate significant revenue to fund new independent research to recommend much greater protection for children and other vulnerable people at risk, including university students, often lonely and mentally unconfident in new surroundings. Such a levy could also fund jointly commissioned gambling clinics, like the new one in London and the one coming soon in Leeds. At the moment, just 2% of those who need help get it, and that cannot be right. The Gordon Moody Association rehabilitation centres have long waiting lists; a levy could bring them down and provide help as soon as possible. In short, addiction is a public health issue, but gambling addiction involves every aspect of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. A levy on the gambling sector to fund the help needed has to be right.

Research could also inform my belief that more action is needed to protect the young from gambling advertising. That means eliminating gambling advertising on live sports programmes. More than 90 minutes of betting adverts were shown during the football World cup, and no live sport on non-BBC channels is free of gambling advertising. Three big companies have already agreed in principle to do that, and I believe it should be implemented as soon as possible, but we should go further and the Gambling Commission should ban gambling advertising during live sport altogether.

The levy could also be used to build on much stronger self-exclusion, with real commitments from banks. How can gamblers access credit that they clearly cannot afford, racking up massive debts, without gambling companies, banks or the regulator being able to prevent it? Why cannot banks identify the issue earlier, and how easy is it for gamblers to completely self-exclude, to stop getting emails or texts highlighting the latest improbable deal? There is currently no easy way for gamblers to put effective blocks on debit card transactions. That is why I fully endorse the Gambling Commission’s discussions with banks about how to improve protection for problem gamblers, and I urge both to move fast on taking real action. I hope that research would echo that.

There has been progress on the software used by some gambling companies to allow for effective self-exclusion, but I have also been shown how easy it is to

get around that; some gamblers will go to great lengths to get around self-exclusion blockages. I have seen evidence of how difficult it can be to contact a human in the gambling companies, and I have seen how once a company has an individual's contact details it will pump out attractive, if sometimes misleading, special offers, day and night. The review could look at how self-exclusion can become an absolute guaranteed 100% opt-out—no ifs, no buts.

I presume such a levy would go to the Gambling Commission, which could also recommend how we can best use technology to protect more people, not just to expand the amount of gambling. Using software such as gamban to block gambling sites can help with self-exclusion, and it should surely be mandatory for all gambling companies to have such systems. Other tools could be developed to help protect the young, such as facial recognition to block under-age gambling more effectively.

This ten-minute rule Bill cannot solve all the problems thrown up by the opening up of the gambling sector through the 2005 Act, nor is it remotely an attempt to ban all gambling. Ultimately, however, it was Parliament that opened the door to online gambling, and with it has come a growing number of citizens vulnerable to gambling addiction. It is no good imagining that the regulator can manage all of the problems alone. We here have a special responsibility, and I believe that a review of the mandatory levy, to fund vital research, protection strategies, changes to policies on credit and access to money that have led in some cases to tragic deaths, and new policies, clinics and rehabilitation centres to help cure those addicted, would make a real difference.

As I said at the beginning, we—society—need to consider our approach to gambling. Will it be the tobacco of this generation—something once widely advertised, then restricted and finally banned from advertising altogether? Will those damaged or even killed by gambling be our legacy, or is this our chance to get the right balance between funding sport, using technology and having the right protections to prevent tragedy? I believe that this Bill, which would require a review of a mandatory levy, would, were the Government to go ahead with it, result in recommendations across different aspects of gambling and protection and would be a major step forward, for we need action now.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Richard Graham, Mr Iain Duncan Smith, Sir Peter Bottomley, Simon Hart, Andrew Selous, Alex Burghart, Tom Watson, Carolyn Harris, Graham P. Jones, Christine Jardine, Ronnie Cowan and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Richard Graham accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 10 May, and to be presented (Bill 380).

Opposition Day

[UNALLOTTED DAY]

Local Government and Social Care Funding

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I must inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected the amendment.

1.40 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that despite the Prime Minister announcing that austerity is over, local authorities' spending power per household is on course to fall by an average of 23 per cent by 2020, and that nine of the 10 most deprived council areas in this country have seen reductions that are almost three times the average of any other council under this Government; recognises that this has resulted in social care budgets in England losing £7 billion; further notes that at the last General Election Labour committed to a fully costed plan to invest an additional £8 billion in social care over this Parliament; and calls on the Government to ensure that local authorities and social care are properly and sustainably funded.

If I may, I seek the indulgence of the House to briefly place on record, as shadow Communities Secretary, my utter shock and revulsion at the recent terrorist atrocities, both in Northern Ireland and in Sri Lanka, over the Easter break. We send our condolences to the families affected and to their communities. Coming so soon after the terrible events in Christchurch, New Zealand, just before Easter, they serve as a bleak reminder of how fragile our human rights and freedoms are, and how we must redouble our efforts in this place and outside to hold our communities together.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The whole House will be grateful for the way the hon. Gentleman has introduced the debate and for those sentiments. Does he agree that people do such things for publicity and public reaction, and that we should take care to ensure that our publicity and our public reaction confronts and confounds their aims, so that what they do will be in vain, even though it has taken a terrible toll on those directly affected?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We should stand firm against terrorist atrocities wherever they are perpetrated. We should stand strong as a community, both in the United Kingdom and in the global community, against such acts of terror. We should call them out wherever they take place.

I welcome the opportunity to raise the important matter of local government funding in an Opposition day debate, especially considering how scarce the opportunities are for the Opposition to raise matters in such debates. I pay tribute to the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), whose dogged pursuit of that issue has allowed us to debate this important matter today.

In this place our discussion has been dominated by Brexit, but across the country our local councils, and the local services people rely on, are straining at the seams.

[Andrew Gwynne]

I pay tribute to councillors of all political persuasions and none for the work they do in serving their communities. I pay tribute to the council officers and dedicated public servants who deliver neighbourhood and care services on the frontline. Years of uncertainty and unfair funding have created a quiet crisis that is now impossible to ignore. Under this Government, the facts speak for themselves: local authorities have faced a reduction to core funding of nearly £16 billion since 2010. That means that councils will have lost 60p out of every £1 that the previous Labour Government provided to spend on local services.

When the Prime Minister entered Downing Street, she promised to build a country that works for everyone, and she then promised an end to austerity. As her time in office probably comes to an end, we are able to reflect on both of those promises. Like in many areas of her leadership, I am sure we will all find that in both those areas she has been sorely lacking.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As usual, my hon. Friend is making a very clear statement about the situation local government finds itself in today. My council is one of the 10 councils to have suffered the heaviest cuts, yet I represent a constituency and a city that is one of the most disadvantaged in the country. It is clear that the decisions that were made about where the cuts should fall have meant that they have been put on the shoulders of the poorest and the most vulnerable, not the richest in society.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She champions the cause of the communities of Kingston upon Hull. It is one of the most deprived local authorities in England, yet it is one of the areas that have received the heaviest cuts to their spending power since 2010. That was a political choice, and one that has decimated many communities, including the one she represents, across England.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend will come on to this argument, but does he agree that cuts to essential local government services in many areas inevitably lead to additional expenditure elsewhere? I think particularly of the decimation of youth services and early years prevention, which has undoubtedly contributed to the extra stress and extreme youth violence on our streets.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We used to have something called Total Place, which was all the public sector bodies working together towards a single strategy for a local area. What we have seen as a consequence of the austerity since 2010 is a complete breakdown of that collaborative working. It is worse than that, however, because rather than public bodies working together collaboratively, pooling resources and getting the best possible levels of services for communities, we have seen cost-shunting. For the sake of saving money on youth services, we are seeing a rise in crime that is pushing up costs for the police. Because of the cuts to police budgets, those costs are shunted on to other public bodies. That is not a common-sense approach

to dealing with people's needs and services, to building stronger communities or to spending public money wisely.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): On cost-shunting, just this morning we heard from representatives of families with children with special educational needs and disabilities. They were talking about their needs not being met through the education budget, the high needs block from local government or the health needs budget, because each is trying to get the other to pay the bill. Children with special needs and disabilities are falling through the gap and remaining unsupported.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are too many instances across the public sector where cost-shunting is resulting in precisely what my hon. Friend says: vulnerable people falling through gaps that should not exist. I think that in their heart of hearts, Conservative Members, who clearly deal with casework that is similar to ours, will know that that is happening in their areas too.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) *rose—*

Andrew Gwynne: If the hon. Gentleman is going to apologise for the cuts he has forced on our local communities, I will give way to him.

James Cartlidge: Very kind of the hon. Gentleman. He was referring to what has happened since 2010. Let us just remind ourselves that the 2010 Labour manifesto said that certain areas would be prioritised and protected. Will he remind us whether that included local government?

Andrew Gwynne: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the 2017 Labour manifesto said that we would put money back into our public services, something that he has failed to do in the almost three years since that general election.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly pertinent speech. Does he not agree that it is completely perverse that public health budgets in York under the Tory-Liberal Democrat council have been slashed, when the NHS 10-year plan says we have to invest in public health?

Andrew Gwynne: It shows precisely the short-sighted way that the Government have approached funding local government. The fact that they passed on public health budgets to local government was, I think, a good move. It was one of the few things in the Lansley Act—the Health and Social Care Act 2012—that I thought was good, because it took back to local councils precisely what they were invented to tackle, which is to improve the health and wellbeing of the citizen. Of course, many councils started off their lives 150 or so years ago as local boards of health. Having that focus on public health and on health and wellbeing is absolutely right, but we cannot do that while cutting those budgets. That is the scandal: the areas that have seen the biggest cuts to their spending power, the areas that have seen the biggest cuts to the revenue support grant, and the areas that have seen the biggest cuts to the public health grant are the ones that need that resource the most.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Let me make a point that neatly sums up what my hon. Friend is talking about. In Chesterfield, we have had a reduction of 43.2%. I took the time to look at the reduction in the Minister's constituency and it is only 12%. That is not a difference of just a couple of per cent. It is three and a half times more in my constituency.

Andrew Gwynne: As my hon. Friend will hear as I develop my argument, that is not just a one-off. It is happening across England and it is unfair. The Tories do not get that blatant unfairness, because they have not seen the same levels of cuts in many of their areas that we have seen, yet the impact that has had on the communities we represent cannot be expressed loudly enough.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab) *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I give way to my hon. Friend, who will express loudly the cuts to her area.

Gloria De Piero: Let me take my hon. Friend to Nottinghamshire, where spending on adult social care is now £33 million lower than it was under Labour. That is £71 lower per head, as need is increasing. Is it not always the case under this Government that vulnerable people are paying the price?

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con) *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman in a second, if I can answer my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) first. It is worse than that, because those are the headline figures. We know that that local authority will have shifted money that was allocated to neighbourhood services to prop up the people-based services of adult and children's social care, so although social care has been cut in real terms, it would be far, far worse were it not for neighbourhood services bailing out the gaps.

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. He talks about unfairness. Does he not recognise that it was under the previous Labour Government, in which he served, that the unfairness was introduced through the funding formula allocations, which shifted resources from local government in shire counties into metropolitan areas such as the one he represents?

Andrew Gwynne: The right hon. Gentleman has made the case for me. Let me dumb it down for him—I do not wish to appear condescending, but it really is as simple as this: there has always been a recognition by Governments of all colours that not every area has the same baseline. Some areas have greater need and often those areas have less of an ability to raise income locally. Because of that, there has been a mechanism, or a formula—for example, whether that was the rate support grant that became the revenue support grant—to ensure that resources from the centre followed need. What we have seen under his Government is a 60% cut to the revenue support grant. Sixty pence in every £1 for the two councils in my constituency, Stockport and Tameside, is a lot of money. A 60% cut to a very small revenue support grant is different—a number of Conservative Members' councils

have only small revenue support grants, or no revenue support grants in some cases. Sixty per cent. of nothing is nothing and that is the unfairness. A 60% cut to my area cannot be filled in by council tax rises, so it means rises in council tax for poorer services. Cuts are cuts—it is as simple as that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): My area is one that got a really bad deal under past Governments and is still getting a bad deal. Let me build a bit of cross-party support. It is obvious that the Government have to find more money for social care for future year budgets, and it needs to go to my area and some areas represented by Opposition Members. It needs to be done fairly, but what is Labour's current thinking on how much individuals and families should contribute, because in social care, one of the big issues is how much of the family asset and income is at risk? Does it have any new thinking on that?

Andrew Gwynne: Of course, individuals and families are taking the hit from all the cuts, and they are having to step in.

James Cartlidge *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: Let me answer the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) first. We have to have a sensible discussion about how we are going to fund social care. Yes, it is about money, and we have pledged to ensure that there is £8 billion for social care—that was in Labour's manifesto in the 2017 general election—and we need to make sure that that commitment remains in our future manifesto and is updated, because it needs that immediate cash injection to start with. However, we also need to look very seriously at how we provide adult social care. I really do wish that we could try to break down some of the politicking that has gone on for far too long—[*Interruption.*] Members can heckle, but it is a fact that before the 2010 general election, Andy Burnham, the then Health Secretary, sat down with the Liberal Democrat health spokesperson and the Conservative health spokesperson to try to work out a way forward. We went into that 2010 general election with poster boards about Labour's "death tax". That serves nobody. We need to make sure that we will have something that is sustainable for the long term, and I hope that we can genuinely get to a place where we can do that and talk about how we fund adult social care and children's services going forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and then I need to make progress.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am grateful that my hon. Friend has mentioned children's services. Clearly, the overspend on children's services has hit a new high of £800 million—and of £12 million in Newham alone last year—and it is calculated that this funding gap will get to £2 billion by 2020. Is it not a complete and utter nonsense, and unsustainable for councils, to be told that they should be using what little reserves they still have to keep safe our very vulnerable children?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Politics is a question of priorities. I often remember the 2017 Budget, when the Government put forward measures to cut the bank levy by £5 billion. We tabled an amendment to the Budget proposing that £2 billion of that same money should go to fully funding children's services, because we see precisely the cost-shunting that I talked about earlier with children's services. It is frankly scandalous that vulnerable children and families are not able to access the support that they need.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. I say this, again, in the spirit of co-operation across the Chamber. He makes the point about adult social care. At whatever level it is funded, he and others have pointed out the unfairnesses between different parts of the country because it is funded through local provision. Has he considered, or would he consider, going back to a system where the money is provided and distributed nationally rather than locally, so that this particular problem will be taken off the backs of local government?

Andrew Gwynne: Of course, I would be very happy to look at any suggestion. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) leads on social care issues for the Labour Front-Bench team, but the fundamental issue is that the money has to come from somewhere and some of that has to be centrally provided. We have set out how some extra resources can be put forward for social care.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way later on, but I want to make some progress.

The Prime Minister has said that austerity has ended—she said it in her conference speech last October—but instead of an end to austerity, in January we saw a local government finance settlement that once again cut even deeper into council budgets.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It went up!

Andrew Gwynne: The Minister says it went up, but actually it confirmed what many of us feared, because under this Government there will never be an end to the pain of austerity. Nothing has changed. Let's bust this myth. This year's funding package, while it offered an increase in spending power next year for local government, came with a £1.3 billion extra cut from central Government funding to the revenue support grant. An uplift in spending power has been paid for by local people through increased council tax. That is not fiscal devolution; it is another attempt by this Government to shift the burden on to local taxpayers and to devolve the blame for these decisions to councillors of all political persuasions, including Conservative councillors.

Areas such as the one I represent cannot bring in anything like the resources they need to meet the growing demand for social care and our neighbourhood services through local council tax increases alone. This has left areas with the greatest need unable to mitigate the cuts

imposed by the Government and residents paying more in council tax for services to be stripped back even further.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) made the point that the last Labour Government shifted money from the shire counties to the metropolitan areas. The shadow Secretary of State described them as areas of increased need, but does he recognise that in rural areas such as Lincolnshire, where my constituency is, services cost more to deliver because of the geography?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Lady makes the case that in rural areas there are greater costs to providing services. In some cases, that is correct, but it is a minority of cases. All the evidence, including in a report commissioned by the Secretary of State's Department, shows that the opposite is actually true. I do not want to get into an argument with the hon. Lady about how we should cut the cake. The cake is shrinking. We need to grow a bigger cake so that we can share out the slices more fairly. As we continue to shrink the cake, all we do is pit her area against my area and her area's needs against those of the area I represent.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Lewisham Council has had to propose a 2% precept to fund the widening gap in adult social care, yet Lewisham is among the 20% most deprived boroughs. Does my hon. Friend agree that rather than asking some of the poorest to pay more, we need proper funding from central Government for essential adult social care?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to grow that cake and the distribution of resources has to follow need. If we are serious about tackling health inequalities, if we genuinely want a fairer, more equal country, if we want to narrow the gap in life expectancy between the richest and poorest, which sadly is widening, we will not do it by cutting resources and services in the areas that need them the most.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. A man who gets on the train at Birmingham New Street and gets off in Erdington, either at Gravelly Hill station or Erdington station, is likely to live seven years less than one who continues out into the leafy shires of Four Oaks. Birmingham City Council is the sixth most deprived in the whole country, yet it suffered the biggest cut in local government history—of almost £700 million—with another £80 million to come. Does he agree that what is grotesque about the treatment of a great city such as Birmingham is not just the scale of the cuts—including 12,000 staff gone from the city council—but the unfairness compared with the treatment of some of the leafy shires? Birmingham is high need but is being treated as a low priority.

Andrew Gwynne: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The treatment of the great city of Birmingham has been appalling. The people of Birmingham deserve the resources they need to have decent public services.

He has been a feisty champion of the needs of the people of his constituency and that great city and will continue to make that case.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way to another great Birmingham MP.

Steve McCabe: If ever there has been a city subject to close Government scrutiny it is Birmingham. For five years, it has been subject to the Government's improvement panel, so the Secretary of State knows the financial situation in Birmingham inside out. How does he justify forcing up the council tax in a city where 42% of the children are in poverty?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. I will leave it to the Secretary of State to answer that, because I think that Birmingham has been dealt a bad set of cards by this Government.

It is not just Birmingham. Researchers from Cambridge University have exposed the uneven impact of the Government's funding of local government. They have found that since 2010 changes in local authority spending power have ranged from a drop of 46% to a fall of a mere 1.6%. When we compare these reductions to the indices of deprivation, we see that more deprived areas have been forced to undergo bigger cuts in service spending, with smaller spending cuts in the least deprived areas. Nine of the 10 most deprived councils have seen cuts three times the national average.

These findings are backed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which also suggests that since 2016 the most well-off councils have actually seen an increase of 2.8% to their spending power, while the poorest areas have seen very little growth, despite having faced the largest pressures on their services.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that the fact that eight of the 10 councils receiving the largest cuts are Labour-controlled while eight of the 10 receiving the lowest cuts are Conservative-controlled reinforces the need for this Opposition day debate?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. We have to highlight the unfairness. We have to keep on until the Government wake up, smell the coffee and understand the damage they are doing to the fabric of so many communities in England through cutting our local neighbourhood services and depriving people-based services, such as adult social care and children's services, of the resources they need.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Essex County Council is the second largest provider of children's services by head of population. It has gone from being a failed children's service in 2010 to now being ranked outstanding by Ofsted, despite there being less money going into the service, but because of a focus on early intervention and partnership working. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that what makes a difference is not just funding for our services but how the money is used?

Andrew Gwynne *rose*—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): How can he disagree with that?

Andrew Gwynne: I can disagree with the hon. Lady because, for a start, funding for children's services has increased in Essex. She should perhaps check that. If she is saying there is not a crisis in children's services, she is going against all the evidence put forward by the Conservative-controlled Local Government Association.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I thank my neighbour in the north-west region for giving way. He is making an incredibly impassioned and very pertinent speech. Will he join me in praising Labour-run St Helens Council for protecting services through an integrated St Helens Cares model and the creation of a people's board, but does he agree that even an innovative council that puts its residents first cannot possibly mitigate the funding cuts of 71% that St Helens Council has suffered since 2010? That is simply not sustainable.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pay tribute to Labour councillors like those in his constituency who are making incredibly difficult decisions. They are the last line of defence for many of our communities, and they are doing what they can, but with both hands tied behind their backs by a Government who simply do not understand the basic economics of the areas that we represent.

Emma Hardy: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way shortly, but I want to deal briefly with the issue of social care before I begin my concluding remarks.

The largest of the pressures on services remains the pressure on adult and children's social care. According to the Local Government Association, adult social care services face a £1.5 billion funding gap next year, and £2 billion is needed for children's services.

Given that the Cabinet are too interested in internal machinations, and given the absence of any leadership from the Prime Minister, we have yet to see the much promised social care Green Paper. In fact, this year's April Fool revealed himself to be the Health Secretary after he missed his own new deadline of 1 April for the Green Paper—but no one was laughing, because that was the fifth missed deadline, following the summer of 2017, the end of 2017, the summer of 2018, and the autumn of 2018. Despite those delays, it seems that little progress has been made.

There is so much concern in the sector that last month 15 key organisations—including the LGA, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, and NHS organisations and charities—were forced to write to the Government expressing their concern that Brexit was becoming a distraction from any action to deal with the real crisis that is affecting the services on which people rely.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way to the Chairman of the Select Committee.

Mr Betts: There are clearly differences between the cuts made in different authorities, but there is a collective view in local government about the crisis in social care. When Councillor Paul Carter, chair of the County Councils Network and leader of Kent County Council, gave evidence to our Committee during our last inquiry into adult social care, he simply said, “We are approaching a cliff edge.” It is possible that some councils will not immediately follow Northamptonshire over that cliff edge, but it will not be long before they do unless there is a fundamental change in the funding of social care in this country.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Let me say to the Secretary of State that if he will not listen to the Chair of the Committee, he should listen to the leaders of his party’s own councils, who are saying precisely the same. There is a cliff edge, and no action that the Government have taken so far has done anything to remove it. It may have pulled a few councils back and given them a few years before they topple over, but unless we fundamentally change the Government’s approach to social care services, we will not be able to solve the crisis in local government.

For the first time in England, we have seen a standard £2,000 tax bill introduced by a Conservative council. We have also seen the costs of the failures of this Tory Government. For instance, the cost of the failure of Tory-controlled Northamptonshire County Council has been pushed on to local people because the Secretary of State allowed it to raise its tax above normal limits as it grapples with bankruptcy. Local people are paying the price of Tory mismanagement: that is what happens when the Tories do not fund local government and are in charge of the town hall.

Austerity is not over, but across the country Labour councils and councillors are showing that it does not have to be this way. Under the shadow of the present Government, Labour councillors are innovating, standing up against austerity, and protecting local services. They are the torch bearers for the new politics that we will see with the next Labour Government. On 2 May, there will be a clear choice: continued austerity with the Tories, or proper investment, fairness and a real change, with Labour councils making a real difference to the communities they represent.

We need a Labour Government because we need a Government who are committed to funding children’s services, funding adult services, funding neighbourhood services, rebuilding our communities from the grass roots up, putting pride back into civic professions, and encouraging our communities to grow and prosper. We will rebuild this country, for the many and not the few. I commend the motion to the House.

2.16 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Let me begin my speech in the same way as the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), and underline the House’s complete condemnation of the appalling terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka and also in Northern Ireland.

The timing of the attack in Sri Lanka at Easter, when people were murdered at prayer, was utterly shocking, and has—rightly—been utterly condemned throughout

the House. Our thoughts are firmly with the Sri Lankan community in the United Kingdom, and we send our prayers and condolences in the knowledge that so many people will have lost loved ones. Let me also say, as a former Northern Ireland Secretary, that the brutal murder of Lyra McKee was utterly shocking and disgusting, and that our thoughts and prayers are very firmly with her loved ones, her family and all who cared for her. What an incredible individual she was. At this time, as her funeral is under way, I know that the House will wish to send its thoughts, prayers and condolences to all who love her and all who care for her.

Let me now turn to the subject of today’s debate. Our local authorities and the people who serve them are delivering essential services and changing lives, and it is right that we help them to succeed. I pay tribute to all who work in our local councils up and down the country for the work that they do and the difference that they make to the lives of so many. As Secretary of State, I have made clear my support for local government, and my wish to enable councils to deliver benefits to the people whom they serve. I commend and support those councils, and I look forward to finding new ways in which services can be delivered most effectively, in the spirit of devolution, closer to the point at which they are received.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Let me say gently to the Secretary of State that what he has just said will be taken as weasel words in Harrow, in the context of a 97% reduction in revenue support grant. Can he offer any assurance that he has persuaded the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in the coming comprehensive spending review, to invest in local government health and social care?

James Brokenshire: Let me point out to the hon. Gentleman that this year we have given our local authorities access to £46.4 billion, a cash increase of 2.8% and a real-terms increase in funding. The settlement includes extra funds for local services, with a strong focus on support for some of our most vulnerable groups. It is part of a four-year settlement that has been accepted by 97% of local authorities, and gives so many areas access to substantially more funding than the least deprived. The average spending power per dwelling for the 10% most deprived authorities in 2019-20 is about 22% more than that for the least deprived.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that as part of the process of increasing the funding that is available, we should increase the practice of business rates retention as a way of incentivising local innovation and enterprise? In places like Cheltenham, it provides an incentive to build out things like our cyber-park, which will create a pipeline of local businesses providing income that can be spent on vital public services.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes the point very effectively about the innovation that we see in local authorities and he rightly underlines the work in his own community. Local authorities have campaigned for more flexibility and control over the money they raise, including the ability to create a more self-sufficient

sector funded from their own resources. That includes the move to 75% business rate retention, with the benefits that that brings.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend will consider changing the funding system to reward efficiency. As he knows, councils such as Bromley, which is near his Bexley authority, are historically low-cost authorities that have achieved enormous efficiencies over the years, yet they are asked again and again to make further efficiencies. Does he agree that it is time to adjust their baselines to reflect the historical efficiencies they have achieved?

James Brokenshire: I know that Bromley does incredible work for its local community. It has innovation, efficiency and real quality at the heart of its efforts. Equally, my hon. Friend raises an ongoing issue in respect of our fair funding review—the review of relative needs and resources. As we reflect on the submissions we have received to date in respect of how that balance is struck, we will certainly give careful consideration to a range of factors to ensure that the funds are applied in the appropriate way to recognise the relative needs and resources of individual authorities.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State not recognise that in the case of Birmingham, cumulative cuts of £775 million over a 12-year period are simply not sustainable for a city that has 42% of its children growing up in poverty? Whether or not he accepts that, will he at least do something about the historical underfunding? He will know that the formula for Birmingham was changed to recognise historical underfunding in 2016-17, but because that was not backdated to correct underfunding in the previous two years, Birmingham has been short-changed by £100 million. Will he at least put that right?

James Brokenshire: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that Birmingham is one of the authorities with the highest funding per capita. Equally, I am looking carefully at the representations that he and other Birmingham MPs have made to me. The ongoing strike action in Birmingham, with the non-collection of rubbish and the impact that that is having on communities, clearly has not helped. I therefore urge him to support the council in dealing with the challenges caused by the industrial strife that is being felt very firmly in Birmingham, with all the manifestations that that is creating.

Emma Hardy: Hull City Council has seen a reduction in its funding of 37.8% since 2010. That is having an impact on children with special educational needs and disabilities. Historically, no account has been taken of the number of children with SEND in an area and the amount of funding that it receives for the higher needs block. If the Government are serious about reviewing the way that local authorities are funded, surely that should be something they take into account.

James Brokenshire: I am working closely with the Secretary of State for Education as we look towards the next spending review. I will come on to the support that is being provided for adults' and children's social care, as well as how we are investing further on a number of other fronts. Therefore, we have recognised and reflected on a number of the pressures that we have seen. Clearly,

in the further review of relative needs and resources, and as we look towards the next spending review, I will look at the data and the evidence very closely and carefully.

Toby Perkins: Will the Secretary of State give way?

James Brokenshire: I will give way one last time and then I will make some progress.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful. One thing that has been missing from the debate so far in terms of social care is that the vast majority of domestic visits are carried out by employees of private sector companies, as opposed to employees of local authorities, because most of these services have been outsourced. Huge numbers of those companies are going bust. It surely shows the Secretary of State that the system is unsustainable when 100 care homes have gone bust in the last couple of years.

James Brokenshire: The Minister for Care, who is sitting on the Bench next to me, says that the number of providers is going up. I can assure the hon. Gentleman about the steps that we are taking in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care; the assurances; the quality work that colleagues across Government support and strengthen; and the arrangements that we put in place to step in when there are failures in the market and a failure of supply in relation to a particular provider. When we look at a number of these examples, we can see the work that has gone in to make sure that they are dealt with effectively.

It is about the quality of service. When we look at the broader issues of social care, which many Members across the House have rightly touched on, the focus is on the delivery of care and the delivery of outcomes. Simply spending money is not the answer in terms of delivering the high-quality care and the outcomes that some of the most vulnerable in our society need.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to talk about the quality of care. Does he recognise that Bromley, his next-door neighbour, provides an example of a willingness to participate in close joint working between the health sector and social services? Given that one of the greatest pressures is the growing cost for top-tier authorities of caring for the elderly, will he ensure that the new funding review and the new arrangements enthuse and support authorities that, like Bromley, are prepared to do joint working?

James Brokenshire: Interestingly, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish tried to suggest that there was not good joined-up working, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) rightly highlights some of the good practice that is taking place in the further integration of health and social care. Indeed, the £240 million of funding that has been committed through this year's settlement was very firmly aimed at ensuring that those pressures were taken off the NHS. I pay great tribute to the work that local authorities up and down the country have been engaged in, particularly around things like delayed transfers of care, where there has been a 45% reduction since the high point fairly recently. That demonstrates very clearly how we are making a difference.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way on that point?

James Brokenshire: I will give way one last time, then I will make some more progress.

James Morris: On the delayed discharge of care, we recognise that ultimately there needs to be more integration between health and social care, and more money. The point that my right hon. Friend makes has a lot of impact, because where we have put money into social care and there has been good structural working between local authorities and the health service, we have seen a radical reduction in the delayed discharge of care. It is not all about money; it is about innovative joint working.

James Brokenshire: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Joint working has been done on delayed discharges of care. It is about ensuring that there is good practice and sharing that more broadly. We are doing that equally in children's social care, where the Department for Education is providing funding to ensure that that is better adopted. It is about good practice and looking at the outcomes. The simple binary approach that the Opposition take is, I think, mistaken.

Another issue on which the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish was fulsome was that of council tax. I want to remind Labour Members that it was the Labour Government who made ordinary families pay the price for their failures, with band D council tax more than doubling under Labour and families paying an extra £750. Even now, Labour wants to abolish the council tax referendum limit, which prevents excessive rises in council tax. It is all very well for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that he is on the side of ordinary hard-working families, but that is not what we saw from Labour in government and it is not what we are seeing now. The real price of Labour is that it always costs you more. This is not just about the cost of a Labour Government; it is also about what people are paying now. Households in Labour-controlled areas have to pay higher council tax to make up for incompetent collection. In the worst-hit areas, Labour councils have unpaid council tax bills of up to £100 million, which is the equivalent of £439 for every household. The 10 councils with the worst collection rates in England are all Labour-run.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is true that Labour is promising £500 billion of extra spending, but what it is not telling ordinary hard-working families is that that will mean an increase in income tax and a doubling of national insurance, council tax and VAT. Those are not my words, but those of a former Labour shadow Chancellor.

James Brokenshire: The interesting thing about some of our earlier exchanges was the acknowledgement that the last Labour Government, going into the 2010 election, did not guarantee to protect local government. We have had to make difficult choices and confront difficult issues to put the public finances back on an even keel, and that has not been easy. I pay tribute to the innovation that councils have been engaged in up and down the country to help us to put this right. It is telling that there was no acknowledgement of that in the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): The Minister is saying that the Tory Government want to spend on things that work. I can tell him that what works is the troubled families programme, which is due

to end next year. Will he take this opportunity to commit to the House to doing everything he can to keep that programme running after 2020?

James Brokenshire: I am glad that the hon. Lady has mentioned the troubled families programme, because I will be talking about that in greater detail later in my speech. I have been hugely impressed by the outcomes of the programme, which, as she rightly points out, is making a difference in people's lives. I strongly believe that the troubled families programme has now shown an evidence base for how it is profoundly doing that. It is doing what has rightly been described across the House as pulling together services to create a person-centric approach, and breaking down some of the silos and barriers. I am a huge champion of the troubled families programme.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): So far, the Secretary of State has blamed striking workers and councils up and down the country. The one group that is not being blamed is his rotten Government: the responsibility for this crisis lies firmly at his door. When will he stop blaming everybody else and take some responsibility for the crisis in this country?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady must equally reflect on the fact that the Labour Opposition voted against a real-terms increase in the core spending available to local authorities this year. That included the additional funding for health and for adult and children's social care. We recognised the pressures and made the right judgments in respect of the pressures that councils explained to us. The Opposition may wax lyrical about funding pressures, but their own councils are not even helping themselves.

The Opposition have some front to claim to be the champions of local government and localism. I took the time to read the shadow Secretary of State's recent speech to Labour's local government conference this year, and it contained some big and bold claims. It is just a shame that they were not backed up by reality. He said that Labour was the party of devolution. I must congratulate him on his selective memory. If I remember correctly, it was his party that, after 13 years, left the UK one of the most centralised countries in Europe. It took the Conservatives in government to roll back the era of centrally imposed targets and the tick-box culture imposed by the Labour party, and it is this Government who have put the public finances back on track and cleared up the mess we inherited from Labour.

Toby Perkins: I am sure the Secretary of State would not want people watching this debate to be misled by what he has just said about police funding. He knows as well as all of us that the reason Labour voted against the spending plans for the police was that we were proposing far greater spending on the police. That is why Labour Members voted against what we saw as his derisory offer to our desperately under-resourced police services.

James Brokenshire: We have given significant investment to the police. Indeed, the Chancellor has made further commitments on some of the most acute pressures that we know are being experienced. I was actually talking about the local government settlement, rather than the

police settlement, which was dealt with separately. However, we made a commitment to providing additional resources, and we are backing the police to deal with the issues of crime.

Robert Neill: I am glad that my right hon. Friend is reminding Labour Members of Labour's record. Someone had to come in and pick up the pieces in 2010. Might he also like to remind them that it was Labour that introduced compulsory capping on council tax levels, reducing the discretion of local authorities? That was then abolished by the Conservative-led coalition. It was Labour that introduced central planning through the directly imposed regional spatial strategies, overriding the wishes of local communities, and it was Labour that enforced compulsory unitary councils in areas that did not want them. One of those decisions was reversed by the Conservative Government in favour of the bottom-up approach brought in by this Government. Labour posing as the party of devolution has more front than Harrods, as my old grandma used to say.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes his point in his inimitable style.

We have promoted a greater sense of devolution, and this comes back to my point about trusting communities, councils and people at the grassroots to get on and deliver for their communities. It is this Government who have given local authorities the tools and resources they need to do their vital work, and it is Conservative councils that are providing value for money and delivering quality services for their residents while keeping council tax lower than in Labour and Liberal Democrat council areas. This includes doing the right thing on recycling, with Conservative councils recycling, reusing or composting around 49% of their waste, compared with 36% under Labour councils. This is about local delivery, which is what much of the current campaign and the votes in the forthcoming local council elections will be about.

Rachael Maskell: One area in which the Secretary of State and the Government have failed to invest since 2010 is staff. The Government may offer warm words, but a 21% real-terms pay decrease for some of the worst paid workers is completely unacceptable. How is the Secretary of State going to address that issue?

James Brokenshire: I hope the hon. Lady will have noticed that, according to the latest figures, real wages are actually going up. I remind her of the fact that pay restraint across the public sector was a consequence of the mess that we inherited from the last Labour Government. I know that this has been difficult; it has been really tough and incredibly hard. Equally, we are determined to maintain the strong economic path for our economy and to ensure that our public finances are now back in the right space and not left in the fashion that the last Labour Government left them in. I am mindful of the essential role our local authorities play in helping the most vulnerable in our society, and I recognise the growth in demand in adult and children's social care and the pressure that that brings.

Mr Betts: I am interested in the exchanges across the Chamber about which party has been the best, or perhaps worst, at the devolution of council funding. It was actually the Thatcher Government who introduced

the capping of rates—it continued with council tax—taking away councils' freedom to set their own business rates. Is it not the reality that neither the previous Labour Government, nor the coalition Government nor this Government have done anything fundamentally to increase the freedom of councils to raise their own funding at a local level? I hope that the Secretary of State will address that when we finally see his devolution framework.

James Brokenshire: I look forward to engaging with the hon. Gentleman and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on issues relating to the devolution of business rates and so many other things. I profoundly believe in the merits and benefits of decisions being taken more locally and of local government having a sustainable position.

I am conscious of the number of Members who want to participate in this debate, so I will now make some progress.

Coming back to social care, £650 million out of the more than £1 billion of extra funding committed to councils at last year's Budget will be going towards adult and children's social care in 2019-20. Of that, £240 million has been allocated to ease pressures on the NHS, which comes on top of the £240 million announced in October to address winter pressures. The remaining £410 million can be spent on either adult or children's social care where necessary to take the pressure off the NHS, meeting the request from local authorities for greater flexibility. Taken with the adult social care precept and the improved better care fund, the Government will have given councils access to £10 billion of dedicated funding, which can be used for adult social care in the three-year period from 2017-18 to 2019-20.

When it comes to protecting our children, we are investing £84 million over the next five years to expand three of our most successful children's social care innovation programme projects. The projects will keep more children at home safely in up to 20 local authorities, but in the long run our work will ensure that our health and care systems are better integrated. That will be our most powerful tool in ensuring we have a sustainable approach in the years to come.

Returning to troubled families, which the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) rightly highlighted, I believe that our programme is helping local authorities to support families with complex needs and to improve outcomes for individuals. The programme has been a catalyst for local services, transforming how they work together, making them more integrated and cost-efficient, and reducing dependency and demand on expensive services. The results speak for themselves. The latest national programme evaluation shows that, when compared with a similar group, targeted intervention saw the number of children going into care down by a third, the number of adults going to prison down by a quarter, juveniles in custody down by a third, and 10% fewer people claiming jobseeker's allowance. While I recognise that there is more to do, the results are a tribute to the tireless efforts of family workers, local authorities and their many partners in our public services and the voluntary sector. This is about so much more than the financial boost that someone can get from a regular wage. It is also about the pride and the dignity that comes with someone being able to take control of their own life.

[James Brokenshire]

The future of this country is not about an ever-growing collection of handouts and entitlements, but about growing prosperity and independence, and that equally applies to local government. This Government are working to build a more confident, self-sufficient and reinvigorated local government. With the end of the current multi-year deal in sight, we clearly need to take a longer view of how we fund councils as we move to a stronger, sustainable and smarter system of local government. This year's preparations for increased business rate retention, a new approach to distributing funding between local authorities, and the upcoming spending review will also be pivotal. Important work is also under way with authorities and the wider sector to better understand service costs pressures.

For years, councils have asked us for more control over the money raised, and we are giving it to them through our plans to increase business rate retention to 75%. In the process, we will provide local authorities with powerful incentives to grow, and authorities estimate that they will retain around £2.5 billion in business rate growth in 2019-20 under the current system—a significant revenue stream on top of the core settlement funding. In addition to more control, councils want and need to see a clearer link between the allocation of resources and local circumstances, and our new fairer funding formula will ensure a more transparent link between local needs and resources and the funding that councils get.

I pay tribute to the leadership and creativity of our councils, which deliver high-quality services for their residents and efficiencies for the taxpayer. We are determined to give them the freedoms and flexibilities they need so that local government can continue to flourish and deliver vital services to meet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. As voters go to the polls at the local elections, this Conservative Government are providing a real-terms increase in spending power for local government and giving councils the freedoms to deliver for their local communities, and hard-working Conservative councillors are providing value for money for hard-working families and the quality services that their residents deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson, I advise colleagues that about 25 Members want to speak. If everybody sticks to around 10 minutes, we will not need to impose a time limit.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did not get the chance to correct the Secretary of State, so it is important that I do so now. My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) quite rightly mentioned the instability of the care market, but the Secretary of State provided an incorrect impression of the situation. Research by Care England shows that there are now 564 fewer care homes when compared with 2015 and that there has been a net loss of 8,119 care home beds nationwide. The Secretary of State gave an incorrect impression, and we should not carry on the debate after that sort of wrong impression has been given.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for that point of order, which is really more a matter of debate. I do not like debates to be interrupted by points of order, but she has put her point on the record.

2.46 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I associate myself with the comments of the other two Front Benchers about the events over the weekend. I had the honour of being in Jerusalem for Easter and was shocked on Thursday and then on Sunday to hear of such horrific events. I was sitting in a site that is so precious to the three monotheistic faiths when I heard that, after the terrorist attack in New Zealand, we had had violence in Northern Ireland and then the horrific attacks in Sri Lanka.

Turning to this afternoon's debate, I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). Here we are yet again. The Green Paper that we should be debating to consider sustainable funding for social care has been kicked into the long grass five times, and there is no sign of it coming forward. Is that just because the House, the Government and the civil servants are too busy with Brexit, or is there really a lack of ideas on how to solve the situation? The problem, however, is that we should urgently be thinking about a way forward.

The NHS five year forward view was based on game-changing public health changes and funding and increased social care funding and provision, because otherwise all we will see is increased demand at the front door of the NHS and then a blockage and leakage of funds at the back end. The four-hour target that we often talk about does not just measure A&E performance; it is about the flow of patients through the system. If patients cannot get home at the other end, the system simply breaks down.

Local government in England has seen an average 28% cut in funding, and I have been shocked by some of the figures that Members have mentioned, which range from 46% to 75% to 97% cuts in central funding. Obviously, everyone has faced cuts to their budgets, but there has been only a 5% reduction in local government funding in Scotland despite a 7% cut in the resource budget. The situation has been much more protected than has been the case in England. In Wales, there has been an 11% cut.

I welcome the long-term NHS plan because it unpicks some of the damage done by the Health and Social Care Act 2012, particularly by reforming section 75, and it tries to drive integration, which I think Members on both sides of the House would recognise is the only way forward. However, it was disappointing to discover yesterday on the Health and Social Care Committee that local government was not involved, almost at all, in putting together the long-term plan, yet it will be expected to deliver more and stronger social care to relieve pressure on the NHS.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that it should have been a long-term health and social care plan if we actually believe in joined-up, integrated working and that the funding settlement for the NHS, very tight as it is, simply will not work without addressing the underfunding of social care?

Dr Whitford: I utterly agree and, obviously, the Department's name was changed to the Department of Health and Social Care to reflect that need for integration, yet that is not the discussion we are hearing.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a valuable contribution. One of the big problems in social care is the lack of social workers, which local authorities cannot fund because of the gigantic cuts conducted over the years by this Government. It is about time we faced up to the fact that austerity has gone on far longer than the second world war and, quite frankly, rationing.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman talks about the workforce, but in both the NHS funding settlement and the forward plan we see a big injection into NHS England, but no extra funding for Health Education England or for public health. Preventing illness is the cheapest thing we can do yet, for decades, Governments of all colours in all places have failed to do that. Unfortunately, the long-term plan does not do it, either.

Age UK talks about 1.5 million people being left without sufficient care and support at home, and it describes the number of people needing elderly social care increasing by almost 50% since 2010, but local authority-funded patients in England are down by a quarter over that time. A third of patients depend on family support, but 2 million carers are over 65 themselves, and 400,000 of them are over 80. Look at the burden we are putting on elderly people to care for their elderly partners, often without respite or support.

Emma Hardy: I recently spoke to an elderly couple. The lady was caring for her husband who had Alzheimer's, which was having such a devastating impact on her health that she ended up having to go into hospital, too. She was not worried about being ill and having to go into hospital; what was upsetting her was that her husband was left without anybody to care for him in an environment he did not know or understand. Surely this situation needs to change.

Dr Whitford: Absolutely. We should value family carers and the care and work they do, right across the United Kingdom, for people who need help in all our communities, yet they are so poorly valued. Carer's allowance does not even equal jobseeker's allowance, which is something we have tried to repair in Scotland, but obviously we do not know whether that money will simply be clawed back by the Department for Work and Pensions in other benefits. That is always the problem. We are supporting carers so poorly. Not only do they have the physical burden and the lack of time to look after themselves, but often they are in financial difficulty.

Scotland is the only one of the four nations to provide free personal care, which we have been providing since 2002. Having integrated health in 2004, we have been working since 2014 to try to integrate health and social care, which is a lot more difficult. The social care environment is different. It has multiple companies and different set-ups. It is means-tested, rather than being provided free. Social care is a real challenge, and therefore local authorities and the health structures within any local health system will require support and funding to work out how to achieve it so that they are wrapped around the patient, not bitching about whose purse the

money will come out of. As we have heard today, the problem is that there simply is not enough money in the purse to start with.

In Scotland, we now allocate half of our health funding to integrated joint boards, which are made up of health and local authorities, to look at how we provide primary healthcare, mental healthcare, social care and children's services so they are driven locally and take account of all the support that is required.

There are three main groups that require social care. First, the elderly. Many of us are heading that way ourselves, and the No. 1 important thing is to maintain people's independence for as long as possible. That is the importance of not rationing surgery for hips, knees and eyes. If we can keep people seeing and walking, and if we can give them a bus pass so that they are out and about with their cronies down the town, they will stay independent and functional for longer.

Of course we have the frail elderly, who require to be looked after in comfort and support. By their own choice, that would be in their own home if at all possible. In Scotland, home care hours have been increased from six hours to 12 hours a week, which has allowed us to keep people with greater dependency at home. Looking at A&E attendances and emergency admissions over the past five years, we can see that Scotland's increase—we are all facing increased demand—has been only one third of that in England. That is why we have had our best performance against the four-hour target since March 2015. It is a combination of supporting people not to arrive at the hospital door and not to be stuck at the other end, because we have driven down delayed discharges every year.

When we talk about numbers such as four-hour targets, it is important that we remember that they are a thermometer taking the temperature of the acute system. They look at how we bring people through. Everyone in hospital wants to get home. They do not want to be stuck there.

The next group is people facing end of life, and they would like, if possible, to be cared for with dignity at home. They want to be with their family but, equally, they do not want to be a burden to their family. If they need respite, they want to have access to it. Since 2015, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities agreed that even people under 65 will be provided with free social care if they are defined as facing end of life, which means they will not be stuck in hospital facing a means test that fritters away their remaining weeks and days of life. A quarter of us will die in a care home, and we want to make sure that we would be happy with the quality of care in that care home, rather than living in squalor or being mistreated.

The third big group is the working-age disabled. For them, quality of life, mobility and, particularly, participation in society are critical. Both in England and Scotland, almost half of local authority social care spending is on people of working age. We tend automatically to think that social care means the elderly. Two thirds of the working-age disabled told a survey that they are not given any help or signposting, and a majority said they are not given enough hours to help them live independently.

Frank's law comes in this month in Scotland, which means that those under 65 with dementia, motor neurone disease or multiple sclerosis will also be eligible for free

[*Dr Whitford*]

personal care. The law is named after Frank Kopel, the footballer who unfortunately developed dementia very early.

Workforce is a challenge for all of us. Our workforce has gone up 12% in the past three years, but all care providers report difficulties in recruiting, and Brexit is only making that worse. We need to value care, and we need to let it develop as a career. People should be paid the real living wage, not the pretend living wage, for all the hours they work, including at night. A carer coming into a patient's house for 15 minutes to throw them out of bed, particularly a carer that patient has never seen before, is not providing quality of care. We need continuity between the patient and the carer. Caring needs a career structure to ensure that people stay in the profession and develop, grow and lead others.

It was said that the UK Government Green Paper would give us a chance to rethink funding, but we still have not seen it to enable us to debate the options. Will that be done by a rise in national insurance, or by continuing national insurance after retirement for better-off pensioners? People have mentioned the German and Japanese systems, but we need to look at the pluses and minuses of both. By 2030, the number of 85-year-olds will have doubled. We need to prepare to look after them, and to give them independence and dignity, so that they do not end their lives in complete misery and squalor.

3 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. It is an important debate, so I thought the tone set by the Opposition spokesman at the start was a real pity. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), ran through things in a very selective manner. It was almost as though he had been in a time machine and missed out certain periods and certain significant challenges faced by the country. He did not acknowledge the situation in which the Labour party left the public finances in 2010, with a deficit running at £150 billion a year and the Government borrowing £1 of every £4 that they spent—the taxpayer was footing the bill for that. Nor did he acknowledge that at the time, unemployment was rising and employment was going down, so people were losing their jobs.

Something had to be done, and the ship had to be steadied. We have seen the results of that, and we now have record employment, record low unemployment and rising wages. Achieving that has involved many difficult decisions. I, for one, know how hard local government has worked, the sacrifices that it has made and the sacrifices that people have made. I pay tribute to councillors across the country, and particularly to Conservative councillors, who operate better-run authorities at lower cost. I also thank council officers, who have worked extremely hard to deal with the challenges that we have faced. They have made a massive contribution to the reduction of the deficit.

I am concerned that so far, this debate has been one-sided. The hon. Gentleman talked about the reduction in revenue support grant and direct money from Government, and that has certainly happened. However, he did not mention the other side of the equation,

namely business rate retention and council tax, and he tried to present a distorted picture of individual local authorities' funding. The reality is that the authorities that he described as worse off actually have the highest spending power.

I am setting out the approach that the Opposition have taken, but I think they should instead have looked at the challenges and considered how we might address them in a sensible and measured way. I am certain in my mind that we need to put more money into local government, and the Government are starting to do so. Spending power is on the increase, and since 2017 up to £10 billion has been made available to local authorities to fund social care. The Opposition's motion mentions £8 billion being put into social care during this Parliament, but the Government are already putting in more than that.

There are significant pressures on social care, whether it is children's social care, where there are more looked-after children; adult social care, where we have an ageing population—that is a great thing, but it means that we have to support more people in their later years—or the important group of people of working age who require social care, such as adults with learning disabilities or people with complex needs who need support. Those groups are all growing in size, and we need to make sure that they are looked after for the future.

In addition to increasing demand, services face challenges from rising costs. The national living wage is going up, and companies now have to pay additional pension costs. That is a good thing, because it means that additional money is being paid to people who do the extremely important and difficult job of supporting the most vulnerable. We need to make sure that those employees are paid more, that they are trained well and that the job becomes more professional, so I welcome those things, but they present challenges. We need to work out in a sensible and measured way how we will pay for the additional provision that is, and will continue to be, required.

The Opposition spokesman talked about how the Labour plans for social care were blown out of the water by the Conservatives during the 2010 general election. I thought that was a bit rich, because that is exactly what the Labour party did to the Conservatives at the 2017 general election. If we are going to have a debate, let us have a sensible, measured and proper one, rather than just talking about how big our pile of cash is and listening to the other side say, "We will create a bigger pile of cash to pay for social care."

We have to acknowledge who is going to pay for social care, and we have to get the balance right. We cannot expect young people who have just entered the labour market—people who are starting work and trying to make their way in life—to pick up the whole tab. We cannot expect older people who have worked all their lives and built up assets to lose all those assets because they need care. We have to look at the matter carefully and proportionately, and try to make sure that there is a balance. We must provide the support that people need but reward people for doing the right thing.

Clearly, local authorities provide much of social care, but we need to look at how that fits in with other social care provision. For example, I always find that continuing healthcare is a real bone of contention. The system is opaque and hard for relatives to navigate. It is hard for people to figure out why their relatives are not eligible

when somebody in the neighbouring bed is eligible. It can take forever for a claim to go through. I have known a number of cases in which, unfortunately, relatives passed away some time before a continuing healthcare claim was settled.

Mr Betts: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Anybody who has dealt with families in that position knows that money may be suddenly withdrawn after a continuing healthcare review goes through. Very often, an elderly person will be transferred to another home because they can no longer afford the one they are in. Is that not something that we need to sort out in advance of a fundamental reform of social care? It is a significant problem.

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman knows a great deal about the subject, and I certainly think that the issue he mentions needs to be looked at, as does the wider system.

We need to look at how social care works in the context of the wider health system. We need integration; we have talked about integration for years, and it does happen, but we need a system that is simple enough for people—for relatives, in particular—to understand and navigate. We need to make sure that the different parts of the system work together. Public health must work with primary care, and our GPs must work well with our acute sector. We must all work together with one common purpose, which is to keep people out of hospital for longer. That is how to improve people's quality of life and reduce the cost to the taxpayer.

I wish to mention a small but important example from my constituency: a doctors' surgery called Whitestone Surgery. I declare an interest because I am a patient there. I mention Whitestone because it does fantastic work through its patient participation group and social prescribing. The patient cohort in the catchment area is made up of relatively older people, and many of the patients who go into the surgery are passported through to the PPG, which runs several activity streams, including an allotment, days out and the odd visit down the pub for a meal at lunchtime. All those sorts of activities are really improving the situation in the area by reducing social isolation and loneliness. As a result of that ongoing work, the surgery is seeing the prescription of a significantly lower amount of antidepressants and fewer people being diagnosed with dementia than at other surgeries with a similar patient cohort. Warwickshire County Council is considering the work at the surgery carefully with regard to expanding it throughout Warwickshire, and studies are also being undertaken to see what merit it has more widely. I am delighted that such important work is taking place in my area. It is a good example of what we need to do to support people.

Local government has done its bit and is doing its bit for the deficit, and we need to support local government going forward. Now that we have the public finances far more under control, we need to put more funding into other services, such as the police and schools. We also need to think about how funding is distributed, because currently the fairness is not there—for example, the people of Warwickshire get a raw deal compared with people in many metropolitan areas. We also need to think about the context and the effect that putting more money into public services has on our public finances. We need to think about the effect on what tax people

need to pay. In the light of those things, the motion does not address the whole picture. It is based purely on a political slant and is not there to support the people whom everyone in this Chamber wants to support. I am afraid the motion is there just to score a few points, so I shall not support it.

3.12 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): As the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, I think the importance that Select Committees have attached to the issue of social care is shown in the amount of time we spend on inquiries on the issue. We have recently published three reports on adult social care, the last of which was done jointly with the Health and Social Care Committee last year. They were all unanimously agreed by our Committee, and in the latter case by the Committees jointly. We are currently inquiring into children's social care, with the report due out next week. Those four social care inquiries show how important the issue is for the Committee and for local government as a whole.

As a Sheffield MP, I have to comment on the fact that my city and constituency have received funding cuts that are far higher than the average percentage in the past nine years, since 2010. Like other northern cities, we have been disproportionately hit, as cities with the greatest problems and needs have seen the Government cut their grants by the biggest percentage.

Putting all that to one side, if I look at the wider context, I see real problems for local government, because as a whole local government has had bigger cuts by percentage than any other area of Government spending. That has united councils of all political persuasions in their concerns about the unfair effect those spending cuts have had on local government as a whole. This comes at a time when demand for the main local authority services—care services—has been rising. The number of elderly people has been growing, which has meant that the number of elderly people who need care has been growing. That is great, because people are living longer. The number of people of working age with disabilities—an element of care that we should not forget—has also been growing, which is another success. In percentage terms, the demand for children's services is going up faster than demand for any other current aspect of local government spending, so that comes on top of what I have described, too.

Those three rising demands mean that despite the fact that more people are in need of elderly care, according to Age Concern some 1.5 million people are not getting it. The threshold has been raised such that people with lower and moderate needs are now excluded from the care systems. People are ending up in hospital who should not be there because prevention is not happening, and people in hospital are not being discharged as quickly as they should be. We see all these things happening as a result.

The pressures on social care are causing other issues. With rising demand and spending on social care, as the cake has shrunk, the proportion of it spent on social care has grown, so the amount spent on other services has proportionately been cut by even more. The National Audit Office has done the figures, and they were given to the Select Committee: cultural and related services have seen a 35% cut; highways services and transport

[Mr Clive Betts]

have seen a 37% cut; housing services, including homelessness and private sector housing, have seen a 45% cut; environmental and regulatory services have been cut by 16%; and planning has been cut by 50%. Those are massive cuts to the basic services on which we all rely day to day.

I worry about all that, because although it is of course important that councils concentrate on care, most people in the country do not receive care for themselves or for people in their families on a daily, regular basis; they rely on other services. They are seeing their council tax bills rise and what they get for their money fall. That is a real challenge and problem for local democracy. People are paying more but not getting any more. We ought to be very concerned about that indeed. It needs to be addressed in the widest sense.

I refer to the comments made by Councillor Paul Carter, but people from the Local Government Association, the County Councils Network, the District Councils' Network, London Councils, and SIGOMA, the special interest group of municipal authorities, have made similar comments. Every council organisation has said that the current situation simply cannot continue and that we need a fundamental change in the amount of money provided for local government in the next spending review. The Select Committee will do an inquiry into that, which will hopefully give Ministers the ammunition with which to badger and berate the Treasury when they have discussions at that level.

We know from the estimates, which no one from the Government has challenged, that by the end of the next spending review children's services are likely to be £3 billion adrift of the funding they need. Social care for the elderly is already £2 billion adrift, with estimates that the average annual increase required to keep pace with demand is around £800,000. That takes us to around £7 billion adrift.

The quality of care is often forgotten about. We need not only to continue to meet the increase in demand, but to do something to improve quality. If demand is going to increase, we are going to have to recruit more staff, and if we recruit more staff, we are going to have to pay them and train them better, otherwise, we will not be able to retain them. So the costs are going to go up even further.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I speak as a co-chair of the all-party group on social care. Next week, we are launching an inquiry into the professionalisation of the social care workforce. My hon. Friend is making an important point about recruitment and retention and the need for more funding. The pressures and demands on funding are leading to a reduction in the professionalisation of the workforce, and as a result to reductions in the quality of care.

Mr Betts: Absolutely. The joint Committee report made the point that the quality of care is so important, and we have to think about the quality of the workforce and how much we pay them. The average social care worker gets paid 29% less than someone doing a similar job in the NHS. That figure demonstrates the challenge that we face.

What are we looking at, then? We have recently had a few welcome sticking plasters of funding from the Government; but next time, we will need a very large bandage, not just a few sticking plasters, to put this issue right. We look forward to the Green Paper, at some point on the horizon. Perhaps the Minister can tell us about the timing for that when she replies, but even now time is now too short for there to be a fundamental change in funding arrangements. We are going to need a lot more of the same.

The two Select Committees recommended that, at the funding review, we take the £7 billion extra that will be in the local government system from the 75% business rates retention and, instead of using it to replace public health grants and other forms of grant, we put it back into the system to deal with the problems of social care. That money can be there and we will not have to change the system. That can be done. We also proposed changes to make the council tax system fairer and less regressive. We can do those things for the next spending review and make sure that a quantum of money—around £7 billion—is available for social care. That would then relieve the pressure on other council services.

We then looked at what the longer-term system should look like. Of course, we need better integration at a local level between the NHS and social care. This is not about a national system of care that replaces what local authorities do; it is about better integration at local level. We must bear in mind that, while it is important that the health service and social care are linked together, the other great join-up that we must have is between housing and social care. The majority of people receiving social care live in their own home, and it is vital that we get those services linked as well.

Emma Hardy: Does my hon. Friend agree that we also need to include education on support for children with special needs and disabilities?

Mr Betts: Absolutely. We need integration on that level as well. The point is that these services are better joined up and delivered at a local level. It is an important role that local government has to play, and it is why local government's hand should be strengthened in these matters.

In coming to our conclusions about long-term arrangements, the joint Select Committee inquiry looked at two very important bases. We went to Germany to see what existed there. Essentially, Germany's model involves an extra percentage on the insurance payments that it gets from the public. There was a cross-party agreement 20 years ago, and the rates in Germany have been raised with no dissent from the public or the parties. It is a system that works and that people agree with, because they know that the money goes into social care. That is what we looked at, and it helped form the basis of our conclusion.

We had a citizens assembly—it was a great experience. We selected around 50 people from all over the country. They met for two weekends in a hotel in Birmingham, and came to unanimous views about how we should deal with social care funding. The principles were clear: we should have a system similar to that of Germany, with a social care premium, as we recommended, but very importantly—the Treasury hates this—the money must be dedicated for social care. People are willing to

pay more if they know where the money is going. That was a fundamental principle that was laid down. There was also the principle of universal and high-quality care, and the point was made that a well-paid and well-trained workforce was needed to deliver it.

We also said that there had to be fairness between the generations and that the social insurance premium should be paid only by people over 40. However, we thought that it was fair to say that people of pensionable age who work should also pay. Another issue that we felt needed to be dealt with was the unfairness of people losing their homes in some cases and of all their assets going to pay for social care. The suggestion was that we could bring in a floor and cap system to make sure that people do not pay anything up to a much higher level and do not pay any more beyond the cap. We can pay for that by simply taking a percentage of inheritance tax, so that everybody pays a bit towards the system. We thought that that was fair.

We also said that, ultimately, we want to work towards a system where social care—personal care—is actually free. We did not think that we were there yet, which was why we recommended these changes to begin with, but we thought that we could get there eventually. We said that the extra money coming in had to be on top of the existing local government system.

This is a very good report. Two Select Committees unanimously agreed how we should raise the money for social care in the future. I say to Members on both Front Benches: why bother with the Green Paper? They should produce the White Paper and get on with it. The solution is there. We have given it to Ministers and shadow Ministers. This is a very good proposal. Please get on and deliver it now for the future.

3.24 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee. I agree with everything that he said in the last part of his speech. It is a shame that his Front-Bench team did not take a similar approach. The shadow Minister spoke for nearly 40 minutes and did not come up with one solution or proposal as to how we improve social care.

I am a great believer in the idea that it is not what you do but the way that you do it. In the same way, I believe that it is not how much you spend but how you spend it that makes the difference. As someone whose constituency falls in the county of East Sussex, which has the highest number of over-85 year olds in the country, I can speak with first-hand knowledge about the pressures on our social care system. I am not saying to the Minister that East Sussex does not need more funding, because it most definitely does. East Sussex has set up its Better Together system, working hand in hand with the NHS. Last winter, by working with the clinical commissioning groups and funnelling money into community care beds, it managed to reduce its delayed discharges by 33%, and that was despite an 11% increase in demand. The £2.5 million extra given to East Sussex by the Government this winter went into the system and, as a result, there were no delayed discharges or ambulances queuing up at the hospitals' closed A&Es. The system was able to cope even with an increased number of norovirus and flu outbreaks.

Last year, we were subjected to urgent question after urgent question about the winter hospital crisis. Sadly, even with the system coping so well this winter, we have not had any acknowledgement of how hard NHS staff and local council staff have worked to ensure that, despite the extra pressure, there was no winter crisis this year. That success is because councils and the NHS are working much better together than they have ever done before.

We need to see what East Sussex is doing across the board. Although it is welcome that we now have a Health and Social Care Department, we are not seeing that joined-up working at a national level. I am concerned that if we do not see that joined-up work across the board, the £20 billion extra going into the NHS will be eaten up by the pressures on social care. If patients do not get the social care they need, their health will deteriorate, they will be admitted more often, they will be sicker when they are admitted and they will be in for longer periods of time. Their discharges will be delayed and their outcomes will be poorer. Not funding social care properly, or not using that money wisely, is a penny-wise and pound-foolish approach.

When this Session comes to an end and we have a new Queen's speech, I hope that social care will be top of the agenda. I wish to see three things. First, there is the funding of social care. I am sad that the amendment to this Opposition day motion was not selected. I too have a copy of the report of the joint Select Committees, "The long-term funding of adult social care". The hon. Member for Sheffield South East is right: instead of having a Green Paper, let us just get on with the recommendations in this report, because there is cross-party support for looking at a social care premium system, such as the one in Germany. We must be honest with the British public: there will need to be funding for social care. We need to have something, instead of people who have worked hard all their lives selling their homes to pay for social care—and not realising that that is what they will have to do—or refusing social care until they reach a crisis point and then have to pay for it.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I invite my hon. Friend to agree that, notwithstanding her radical suggestion, which was also made by the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, about not bothering with the Green Paper, it would nevertheless be helpful if the publication of the Green Paper was now actually announced as a date—not as a month, a season or even a festival, which is the latest estimation we have had, but actually as a date.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is quite right. I am being slightly facetious in saying that we do not need to bring out the Green Paper. However, it would be very welcome indeed if the Green Paper contained some of the Select Committee's recommendations.

We need a long-term funding solution, and I have discussed this with the Minister previously. The four-year settlement for local government was really helpful. If local authorities could have a 10-year settlement like the NHS has just had, they could do far more with their money, even if they were not seeing the significant increases that they would particularly like.

My third request is to look at the better use of our healthcare and social care professionals. We have grown up with a historical medical model that has depended on doctors and GPs, but people often need a diverse

[*Maria Caulfield*]

range of professionals to help them. The East Sussex Better Together model has just announced its community pharmacy programme, which is improving communications for patients discharged from hospital and helping them with their medication. The transfers of care around medicine project, or TCAM, is enabling those patients at risk of delayed discharges or readmission to hospital to have a dedicated pharmacist to help them, because we know that having problems with medication is one of the core reasons that people fail when they are discharged from hospital.

Under the community pharmacy programme, pharmacists would have access to patients' medications, and would be able to answer their questions, monitor side effects and issue repeat prescriptions—things that often do not happen when someone is discharged home. The research and evidence base show that following such a model will reduce admissions and length of stay, and give patients a better experience and better outcomes. Some 112 pharmacies in East Sussex are going to take part in the project, which is a joint working venture between the county council and the clinical commissioning groups. I encourage the Minister to look at rolling this scheme out across the country, so that we can move away from being so dependent on GPs and doctors. I am conscious that there are a number of doctors in the House this afternoon. Doctors do valuable work, but there are other healthcare professionals that we should also be using.

This is not just about funding. Although the Government have given £20 billion extra for the health service, funding for local councils has increased by £1.3 billion this year—an increase of 2.8% compared to last year—and we have given extra money for winter funding, it is what authorities do with that money that makes the biggest difference. We need a long-term solution and a specific funding supplement, as recorded and recommended by the Select Committee. We also need to make better use of some of the fantastic resources that we sometimes fail to recognise. We can do a lot more, even with the existing resources. I am disappointed that the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson did not take the same tone as the Chair of the Select Committee, because we can do more to improve the lives of our constituents.

3.32 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I am very pleased to speak in this debate, which I thank my Front-Bench colleagues for securing. This is our first Opposition day debate for goodness knows how long; it has been so long that I have lost track. It is important that we have this debate just about a week before hundreds of local councillors and council candidates from all parties go to the polls across the country.

The House recognises that we have been embroiled in the Brexit nightmare for the last few months, as have the Government, but the vital work of local government has continued in the meantime. That includes the vital work of hundreds, if not thousands, of local councillors to ensure that all our local communities are provided with the services and support on which they depend. We often forget that local councillors give an awful lot of time for not very much reward in order to keep the wheels of local democracy running, and they are currently doing so in unprecedentedly difficult circumstances.

Central Government funding for local councils such as mine in Exeter has been cut by a massive 60% since 2010, and that has put an intolerable strain on councils' budgets and their ability to deliver local services. Let us not forget that this has come on top of the big cuts to the police service, the fire service, schools and other local services. There can be few of us, or our constituents, who have not experienced the impact of these cuts—whether through the loss of a teacher or classroom assistant from one of our schools, difficulty in obtaining the care we need for a vulnerable child or elderly relative, the absence of a local police officer from the streets in our area, or the unrepaired potholes in the streets outside our front doors.

At the same time that the Government have cut support to local councils such as mine in Exeter, they have expected them to raise more of their own funds that they spend locally through the local council tax. That is why my constituents and others around the country have now faced year upon year of above-inflation increases to their council tax. As we all recognise, council tax is a very unfair tax. Unlike income tax, which funds central Government, council tax does not accurately take into account people's ability to pay. For example, this year Devon County Council, which levies the bulk of Exeter's local council tax, has put up its charge by 3.99%—let's call it 4%—and the Conservative police and crime commissioner has raised her council tax by a whopping 12.75%. That means that my constituents in Exeter now pay significantly more through their council tax for policing than for all of the local services provided by Exeter City Council.

Those cuts in Government support have inevitably meant that local councillors have had to make difficult and in some cases unpopular decisions. The Prime Minister announced at the Tory party conference last autumn that austerity, the era of cuts, was over, but that simply is not true. Exeter City Council has to find a further £3.9 million of savings this year and next. So far, its good financial management and our city's relative economic success have enabled our council to do that without damaging cuts to vital local services while the Labour council maintains one of the lowest district council tax rates in England. Our council also has ambitious but essential plans to tackle transport congestion, provide more council housing and social housing, and to do much more in the years ahead, but the longer austerity and Government cuts go on, the more challenging delivering that vision becomes.

I congratulate the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), on his excellent speech on the subject of social care. We are all keenly aware of the crisis in our social care services and the devastating knock-on impact it is having on the health service and other services—indeed, the Health and Social Care Committee has written and published countless reports on and conducted countless inquiries into the matter.

I echo my hon. Friend in sincerely urging the Government and our own party's Front Benchers to give serious consideration to the excellent recommendations we published following our Committees' joint inquiry last year. It is often said that solving the problem of long-term sustainable funding for social care is impossible—it is simply too difficult to reconcile the different interests,

and too controversial for politicians to agree. Well, we did in our joint inquiry. Politicians from across the political spectrum, from what one might call the hard right or the Thatcherite right to the socialist left, unanimously agreed a blueprint that gives any Government a sustainable and equitable solution to the challenges of long-term social care funding. Until we crack that problem, we will not be able to resolve many of the other problems and challenges that have been and will be raised in this debate. Will the Government use our report as the starting point for their Green Paper when it is at last published, whenever that may be?

As we face the elections in eight days' time, I pay tribute to all local government bodies and local councillors of all parties, who have had a pretty thankless task in recent years but who have none the less achieved some amazing things. In particular, I thank and pay tribute to the leader of Exeter City Council, Pete Edwards, who is retiring next week. Pete is an old-style Labour leader, a local Exonian lad who became a bus driver and rose up through the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers to run our city for the past 10 years—and what a challenging 10 years it has been. His no-nonsense approach, which can at times come across as rather gruff, may not be to everyone's taste, but those of us who know Pete well and who have worked with him closely over the years know that he has always had the interests of Exeter and its people at the very heart of everything he has done. It is no surprise that under Pete's leadership Exeter has risen to become one of our most successful and thriving cities. That is in no small part down to him, so thank you, Pete.

3.38 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). He spoke about a blueprint; I have read that report and I remain unconvinced that it absolutely nails down who would pay and how much, which is of course the toughest part of these decisions. None the less, it is a very good proposal and I respect that.

Like the Labour Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), the right hon. Gentleman referred to cuts in local government funding since 2010. I hate to labour the point—it is a political point—but we cannot avoid asking ourselves why those cuts were necessary. The motion mentions sustainability, as does the Independent Group's amendment, or what we might call the TIG amendment. But the cause of our problem was unsustainability in the public finances and the economy, with a huge growth in all kinds of borrowing, including private borrowing, mortgage borrowing and public borrowing prior to the crash, and public spending commitments based on unsustainable tax income from, for example, city bonuses. That was never going to be sustained. It was always going to end in a big crash, and—guess what?—it would always fall to us to step in and fix the problem.

Labour MPs may deny that. I asked the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish whether Labour's 2010 manifesto protected local government. As he did not answer, let me remind the House what the manifesto said:

“Labour believes we should protect frontline spending on childcare, schools, the NHS and policing, and reform our public services to put people in control.”

Note the absence of local government funding. It goes on to say—this is the key line:

“We recognise that investing more in priority areas will mean cutting back in others.”

In other words, if an area of spending was not protected, it would get a right old shellacking, which is what happened under us. We did the same thing. We had priority Departments that we protected, but at a time when the deficit is very high, if we protect some Departments—which is perfectly justified, as we did with the NHS—others will take a disproportionate hit. That would have happened under Labour. I honestly do not say that for the purpose of political point scoring. It is to underline the reality that there is no parallel universe where there would not have been a significant hit to the grant given from central Government to local authorities after 2010.

Norman Lamb: To go back to trying to find solutions to the problem that we face, the hon. Gentleman mentioned the joint Select Committee report. Does he agree that we need a new funding stream, as the Select Committees suggest, and that the best way to achieve a sustainable solution is to work cross-party, as the Select Committees did, to come up with a solution? Even if they do not have all the detail yet, that is clearly the right way to achieve a sustainable settlement.

James Cartlidge: That is a good point, and I will come to that. I make what is essentially a political point about Labour's manifesto because we have to get into our heads the idea that there will never again be a time when local authorities do not have to make difficult decisions and look for efficiencies and innovation. The idea that there will always be a cavalry that can come over the hill and, with the wave of a magic wand, summon up central Government funding—which, by the way, does not grow on trees, but also has to come from taxpayers—is wrong.

Colleagues are right to mention good examples of best practice and innovation. In my constituency, I have two district councils and two wards of West Suffolk. West Suffolk is a newly merged council of St Edmundsbury Borough Council and Forest Heath District Council, and savings have been made through that process. Babergh district is entirely contained within South Suffolk. It is not a merged district council. There was a referendum on whether Babergh should merge with Mid Suffolk. Babergh voted to remain independent from Mid Suffolk, but they merged their back offices, and there have been huge efforts to achieve savings and efficiencies. Babergh has left its head office in Hadleigh in my constituency and is now based in Ipswich, outside the district, which has been unpopular but has saved money. It has set up a joint venture to renovate and restore its old headquarters and make them a commercial asset. The point is that those sorts of changes by district councils will always be required.

Suffolk County Council has seen huge innovation in relation to social care, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who is on the Front Bench but cannot speak in the debate, will know. Councillor Beccy Hopfensperger has done great work as the cabinet member for social care in Suffolk. Through the use of technology, the council is saving money, driving down costs and improving care. For example, sensory apps are being used, so that families can know

[James Cartlidge]

whether their loved one who is able to stay at home is moving around and mobile—in short, that he or she is well. Such technological innovations can help to reduce the cost of care and deliver better care.

On the broader question that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) raised about the sustainable funding of social care, I feel passionately about this issue. The biggest issue in British politics begins with *b*, and it is not Brexit by a long chalk; it is Beveridge. The welfare settlement we have in this country covers the whole of the state pension, the NHS, social care and every aspect of the contract that we all thought we had entered into, but the system is not remotely sustainable. If we look at the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecasts for just NHS spending 50 years from now, we see that it estimates we will be spending the same again in real terms as we do on the NHS now because of changing technology, demand and so on, so we have a huge challenge ahead of us.

On the specific point about paying for social care, I recently had a constituency surgery at which an elderly lady came to see me because her husband has a very difficult condition and she wanted to know what support was available to her. She felt she was in that category of my constituents who are neither so poor that they receive lots of help nor wealthy enough to be able to afford to fund a good lifestyle. I asked her, "What about your house? Do you have housing assets?" She said, "Yes. We have a house worth about £700,000, with no mortgage." However, in her eyes, she has no money.

This issue of housing and assets is always going to be the most controversial point, as we discovered to our cost at the last general election. The residential housing assets of those aged over 65 is worth between £1 trillion and £1.4 trillion, depending on which estimate we look at, and that is a staggering sum. We have to accept that at the core of this issue—and this is the reason why it is so controversial—those entering the workplace today will not have occupational pensions and will not build up such a level of housing equity. That is highly unlikely because, in my view, we will not see such a period of high house price inflation again; it is not sustainable. We are reaching a point where those paying into the system are seriously questioning whether they will get the same benefit as those who retire today.

This intergenerational issue is no one's fault; no one designed it that way. In fact, the welfare system I have mentioned, the Beveridge system, was built with the very best of intentions for a post-war country. However, the thing we need—and I will conclude with this key point—is honesty. That was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who is a nurse, and I greatly respect the expertise she brings to this issue. In this populist, Trumpian era, the one thing that will make this work is all of us being open and transparent about the tough choices we are going to have to make. No one is going to have a free option. There is no free option: every option available is going to cost.

I happen to think that the best option will involve some use of housing equity, perhaps with a choice for people to pay through an alternative method if they do not want to bind themselves into that. In relation to those entering the working population, I think we should look at the success of auto-enrolment. How many people here have had emails from constituents complaining

about the rise in pension contributions from their salary from auto-enrolment? I have not had a single email because people believe it is a contribution from which they will benefit. It is not like the old, pay-as-you-go system, and I think we could link the social contributions of the young generation through a premium to such a system, as the Select Committees have suggested.

It will be very difficult to come up with a solution for social care. It may take consensus, or it may take a future Government with a large majority being pretty tough and disciplined. It will take one or the other, not what we have at the moment. However, we can make a start, and we have to be open and transparent about the fact that there is no easy option, but there can be an option through which we get much better care for the next generation.

3.48 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The focus of my speech will be the stark reality that adult social care faces today. I doubt anyone here—actually, I am absolutely sure that no one here—would argue that adult social care is not an incredibly important issue. Many of the most vulnerable people in our society rely on social care to provide them with dignity and a life that is not just a bare existence, but one worth living. Indeed, many of our vulnerable people look forward to their only visitor of the day being from the social care or health services.

It pains me to assert that social care in this country is failing, but up and down the United Kingdom, the actions of Conservative-led Governments since 2010—I will speak a little bit about that later—have left our social care provision tending to a state of disrepair. If action is not taken, that could lead to a collapse in social care provision. The Government must recognise that the demographics of our nation have changed and continue to change, and as we make advancements in medicine people in our nation are living longer.

The National Audit Office estimates that between 2010-11 and 2016-17 the number of people aged 65 and over in need of care increased by 14%. Indeed, that demographic shift can be seen in my constituency, where the percentage of over 65s will more than double in four years, between 2017 and 2021. That is in addition to the increase in the number of people with learning difficulties and dementia.

That pressure is being admirably handled by the men and women who work in our care industry. However, that workforce are low paid, with sick pay and pensions not even being universally delivered. Is it any wonder that the industry has a turnover rate of almost 34%? For those who stay in the workforce, there is a severe lack of training and development, in large part due to a frankly unacceptable lack of investment, which is laid bare when compared with the equivalent spending in the NHS. The lack of investment in and pay for our care professionals has left a chasm in social care staffing. The Care Quality Commission report, "The state of health care and adult social care in England", highlights an adult social care vacancy rate of 15%. That means that 110,000 nurses, health professionals and social workers are not in place to do the severely needed work.

Unpaid carers provide an estimated £132 billion-worth of care each year. There has been a systemic unloading of responsibility by central Government on to local

authorities. Legislation such as the Care Act 2014 has increased local authorities' responsibilities in areas such as deprivation of liberty safeguards, the independent living fund and transformed care services, to name a few, without the funding necessary to deliver them.

The situation is further exacerbated by the continued delay of the Green Paper on the future of adult social care funding, following the proposals and recommendations of the Dilnot report. Until it is introduced, the future funding arrangements remain unclear. Despite that, my local care providers continue to deliver outstanding adult social care, with St Helens Cares receiving the *Municipal Journal* award, and Kershaw day centre winning the Dementia Care Matters award. Imagine what they could do if they actually received the funding they require. St Helens Cares truly integrates social care and health; it works with one pack of records and everything is integrated in one building. People remain at home and go to hospital only when they absolutely need to. It is a joy to see and we can prove—we have the evidence—that in just a few months that approach has reduced by 7.5% the number of people going into hospital.

My final point, which has been a common theme throughout my speech—indeed, it has been raised by many others—relates to funding. Since 2010 local authorities have experienced real-terms decreases in their core grant from central Government, which in turn has led to expenditure on adult social care falling by almost £1 billion between 2010-11 and 2016-17 and onwards. That has forced local authorities to choose between delivering either their social care responsibilities or their other commitments, as outlined by the “Long-term funding of adult social care” report.

I am sure that the Government will retort that they have made commitments to increase adult social care funding, such as the short-term funding measures of the additional £9.4 million between 2016 and 2020. However, as the Local Government Association told the report inquiry, those mechanisms have a number of limitations. They also fail to deal with the short-term issues facing adult social care, let alone the long-term issues.

The better care fund provided just over £13 million between 2011-12 and 2019-20. That is not to be sniffed at, but it is not enough to cover demand as a result of demographic shifts. To put it simply, the additional funding provided by the Government is like a sticking plaster on a gaping wound. It will not stop the bleeding and it will not help it to heal.

There has been a 1.4% decrease in nursing homes, and 32% of directors of adult social care saw homecare providers close or stop trading just six months before the “State Of Adult Social Care Services” report was published by the Care Quality Commission. The number of people receiving publicly funded care fell by 400,000 from 2009-10 to 2016-17. It is estimated that 1.2 million older people may now have unmet care needs—this has had a knock-on effect for the NHS, although in some places it has not been as hard as in others because, quite frankly, working together does work—leading to a delay in transfers of care out of hospitals and an increase in admissions as the lack of adequate care can lead to health complications. The issues facing adult social care are grave. There are solutions, however.

First, I call on the Government finally to face the facts and tackle the underlying issue of adult social care

and make significant funding increases. As stated in the evidence given to the 2018 report, “Long-term funding of adult social care”:

“Before further reform of the system can be contemplated, the funding gap must be closed.”

We need to stop the uncaring austerity measures that have been forced on the country since 2010. And may I bring this to the attention of those who are not aware of it? There was a global financial crisis in 2008. It went right across the globe. It was not the Labour Government. In fact, Labour did get the economy going here before the Conservatives took office with the Liberals. So it was not Labour. In fact, that Labour Administration paid off more debt than any other previous Government on record—debt we inherited, Members might be surprised to hear, from the Conservatives.

St Helens does receive funding from the Government—short-term funding. We cannot refuse it. We want it and we need it. We have £8.3 million from the better care fund, but what is going to happen next year, in April 2020? Do we know that yet? Funding only goes up to April 2020. What will happen if £8.3 million is taken from St Helens? That is 17.5% of our total social care budget. Other councils will be suffering similar impacts, so what is going to happen to social care?

Secondly, let us follow the example of St. Helens Cares and others—Salford Together is superb. Such initiatives, however, need support. They involve, in large part, the integration of social care and health. That does help. It is certainly a much better experience for the recipients of the service, the members of the public. They do not want to go into hospital; they would much rather stay at home, with support. There are teams based in hospitals providing a single point of service, reducing pressure and providing an almost seamless transition from health care to social care. That truly is working together. We need more support to help us achieve that and sometimes that means a little bit more financial help.

The Government have renamed the Department of Health to the Department of Health and Social Care, but I fear this change in approach has been in name only. I call on the Government to link health and social care truly—not only by administration, but with regard to workers' rights, training and financing—to deliver the social care that the people of this nation need and deserve. I call on the Minister to go back to the Department, to talk to the senior people above him and to get them to truly integrate and provide the necessary finances. There is no need for austerity—certainly not for social care.

3.59 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer). She gave a very good and comprehensive speech, but I cannot say the same about the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, who gave an impassioned speech that was no doubt great for Facebook clicks but bore very little resemblance to the reality and substance of the debate today. We have a true cross-party challenge that we need to address, and he conveniently chose to ignore some of the critical points about council funding, as it is distributed across our country.

[*Rachel Maclean*]

Many Opposition Members spoke about Birmingham, a city that I know well. It is a great city; I have lived and worked there for many years. They were decrying the Government for their seeming neglect of spending in Birmingham. The blame for the problems in Birmingham lie firmly at the Labour administration's door. Shall we just look at the facts? In my constituency in Worcestershire, the core spending power per dwelling is £1,356, and in Birmingham, it is £2,022—nearly 50% more. Yes, this reflects the need, but we have need in my area of Redditch as well. What is that administration doing with the money? It is squandering the money on consultants and inefficient services, when it cannot even collect the rubbish on the streets. There is rubbish piling up. It is breaking its promises to the electorate. It cannot collect the bins. The strikes have cost it £12 million, which could have funded the council tax rise that it has just inflicted on its residents.

However, that is enough about Birmingham and enough about that. I want to focus on this very important issue, on which I think there is more consensus than there is political point scoring. There is no doubt that adult social care is an absolutely critical issue. As a Member of Parliament, I hear from people who have tragic stories and face very difficult choices. I am also the daughter of a dementia sufferer, who lives on her own in Cumbria. I have seen at first hand the difficulties and challenges of navigating the system to support a frail, vulnerable lady in a very isolated rural area. We all have constituents that suffer from dementia and other conditions, so we need to grapple with this issue.

It is right to say that the lack of a social care Green Paper is a missed opportunity. I am delighted to be the co-chair of the all-party group on carers, which is doing some excellent work. Carers, of course, are the unsung heroes. They provide £132 billion-worth of care across the UK. Over the next 10 years, 20 million people will start caring. We know that unpaid carers make a huge contribution in so many ways, so I gently call on the Minister to address that.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is rightly raising the plight of carers, which is a subject that is very close to my heart, as it seems to be to hers. Does she also regret the lack of a national carers strategy from her Government? The last national carers strategy was produced in 2009 and there is a campaign among carers to get the Government to produce one. We do not have a Green Paper and we do not have a national carers strategy.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Lady for that point; we work together on the all-party group and we share those concerns. I was about to press the Minister for more updates on when we can see the Green Paper, because while this debate is about local authority funding, of course there is also the role of carers and joining up the role of carers in the national health service and in local authorities. Those services have to work together and that is a critical part of this debate.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Maclean: I am sorry—I will not, because I do not have very much time, and I have a lot to get through.

We cannot artificially separate these two pots of funding. Instead, we must link them together more holistically. The NHS long-term plan includes some welcome focuses on carers—perhaps the hon. Lady agrees they are helpful—among which I would highlight the use of innovative technology, such as smart home technology, that can, for example, monitor when a dementia sufferer does simple things such as turn on the kettle or switch on a light, and which can be linked to an app to enable someone such as a relative—like myself, for example—to see what their loved one is doing at any given time. It is great that some utility companies are developing apps that can work in this space. I welcome that. We have to get behind those efforts to join up care.

I want to highlight another aspect of the carer spectrum. Young carers are often completely hidden from view, yet they do a fantastic job supporting their loved ones, and it often has a knock-on impact on their schooling and mental health—40% of young carers suffer from mental health problems. My final point about carers is the importance of companies and employers having a proper strategy for people juggling work and care. Most carers work, or try to work—often they have to leave work—and we should consider how we can better support them to provide that care. It is great to see the Minister for Care in her place. I know she is engaged in the detail of these issues.

I turn now to my constituency and my council, Worcestershire County Council. Of course, it faces pressures, like councils up and down the country, but I applaud it for its work in managing these pressures. In meetings with me it has called for the consultation on the fairer funding review to be brought forward quickly so that it can have more certainty to plan ahead. It needs certainty by October to plan for future savings it will need to make. It has had to find savings of £22.9 million already. A positive development in our area, however, has been the work across councils to bring forward the 75% business rates retention pilot, which has resulted in up to £4.9 million more to spend on social care. This has relieved the pressures considerably. Given that the county council spends 41.8% of its net budget on adult social care, and that we have a rising population of people demanding social care, this is really important and very welcome, but it has to be a sustainable settlement that the council can build and plan on.

I turn now to the second half of the equation—it is a shame this is sometimes neglected by Opposition Members. The shadow Secretary of State talked about growing the pie. This is critical. As well as looking at where the money comes from, we as Conservatives try to think about how we can generate more money—more pie—in our local areas. For me, at the heart of that is creating thriving local areas and town centres where people want to move to and businesses want to invest, which in turn generates more revenue and more business rates and a virtuous circle for our local economy.

That is at the heart of our “Unlock Redditch” strategy. My Conservative colleagues have had one year in office in Redditch town hall. They took control this time last year, after eight years of Labour, when there was no positive vision for the future. They have taken control and set out how they will build more social housing and help to empower businesses and the local community to build a thriving town we can all be proud of. It is a positive aspiration for our future and I am completely

behind the strategy. It is about having a mission and a plan for the future. That is what we have in Redditch. Let me take this opportunity to say to anyone in Redditch who may be watching the debate, "It is vital that you go out and vote Conservative in the local elections." If people vote Conservative, we can retain control of our town hall and continue the effective and careful management that has enabled our team to deliver services in the face of spending pressures and pressures on budgets. Similarly, Worcestershire County Council, in the face of some difficult decisions, has maintained essential services such as libraries and social care.

Let us put aside the hysterical political polemic that we sometimes hear from the Opposition Benches, and focus on working together. We have seen some excellent examples of that, so let us focus on it now, and grasp the opportunity to provide a great social care system in our country.

4.10 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Let me begin by putting my speech in context. Some of the wards in my constituency are among the most deprived in the country, and feature regularly in the index of multiple deprivation. Thirty per cent. of children in my constituency are growing up in poverty, and in some wards the figure is as high as 50%. My council's revenue support grant has been cut by more than 50%. Millions of pounds have been taken from Burnley, which has affected services provided by both Burnley Borough Council and Lancashire County Council.

Let me take this opportunity to thank Burnley's Labour council, which has delivered services valiantly. It has gone above and beyond, in difficult times, to grow the pie and create an environment in which businesses can grow. It has absolutely no support from central Government, yet it toils on, and my thanks go out to each and every one of its members.

Both the county council and the borough council have been faced with the unenviable task of rationing services as the budget cuts have had their impact. Cuts clearly have consequences, and the current level of cuts is touching every part of our society. We have gone beyond the superficial. Decent roads are a luxury of the past: no one expects to be able to drive a car down a road in my constituency that is not riddled with potholes. The libraries are closing. Subsidies are no longer available for bus routes to rural areas, so many of my vulnerable constituents are now isolated. However, we are taking all that on the chin: those are frills of the past. Some of my constituents are suffering daily when it comes to services as important as social care for the elderly. Many old people are sitting alone in their homes, relying on the carers who provide them with the only contact that they have with another human being in 24 hours. Cuts in care packages mean 20-minute visits, which means that there is barely enough time to prepare a hot meal and get someone out of bed who has been waiting desperately with toilet needs. That is what we have come to.

We are seeing, not surprisingly, the see-sawing of old people in and out of hospital. Inadequate social care budgets have consequences for the wider NHS. Old people languish in hospital beds. They are not bed-blocking. They do not want to be in hospital, and their families do not want them to be there. They want to be in their

own homes and to be afforded dignity in their own homes, but as a result of the cuts that is just not happening, despite the councils' best efforts.

Youth services are now virtually non-existent. It is no wonder we have seen a rise in youth crime and extra pressure on youth offending services. The services that are needed to support young people in our communities simply are not there. A women's refuge in my constituency which regularly has to turn away desperate women because it is bursting at the seams is threatened with closure, because sustainable funding cannot be guaranteed from one year to the next. It is an absolute disgrace that a service staffed by dedicated people protecting vulnerable women and their children should be under the threat of closure.

Support services for schools have been decimated. One of the saddest areas is the total lack of provision for children with special educational needs. In the first instance, they and their families wait months on end for a diagnosis that could even begin to attract some social support. When the diagnosis is achieved, the support is just not there. We have seen the very worrying trend of parents left with no choice but to home educate their children. Parents who have never sought to take on that responsibility are left with no option but to keep their children at home. That does not help the family and it does not help the children.

Those cuts are so short-sighted. Our children are the future of this country. If we invest in them and support them now, they will go on to be economically productive. Taking services away from all vulnerable people is storing up trouble not just for the local council, but for the wider economy.

The Secretary of State said that times have been hard, but who have they been hard for? They are hardest for the most vulnerable in our society: for the children with special educational needs; for the old people in need of social care packages; for lonely people isolated because the buses are not there anymore. After nine years of budget cuts, the services have been absolutely savaged. The Prime Minister tells us that austerity is over; I see no sign of that in my constituency.

There is a recent consultation from Lancashire County Council, which has to make further savings of £135 million on top of the savings I have just talked about. It is consulting on reductions in street lighting—at a time when police budgets are being cut, we are creating a burglar's paradise. It is consulting on the remodelling of health improvement services, which is actually a withdrawal of support services in the community for alcoholics seeking rehabilitation, smokers trying to quit and people in need of obesity services. That will all store up problems for the NHS. There is a proposal to increase the costs for self-funders accessing day care services by an eye-watering 15%. The council is consulting on cuts to home improvement services for the disabled and the elderly who need adaptations to be able to live independently in their own homes. It is all counterproductive and it all flies in the face of what the Government say they care about.

The council is consulting on cuts to the welfare rights service. There are proposals to remove respite breaks for parents of children with life-threatening conditions and to end the audit of child safeguarding services. The budgets for social care, fostering, adoption and the

[Julie Cooper]

youth offending team are all being cut. There are reduced budgets to support looked-after children, and so it goes on.

Government Members might choose to deny it, but this is the reality of a Conservative Government refusing to adequately fund local authorities to deliver the services that our constituents so desperately need. This cannot go on; people have had enough. I hope that people in my constituency are listening to this debate, that they appreciate the efforts of the Labour council to prioritise their needs in very difficult times, and that they remember that next Thursday.

4.18 pm

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I am very pleased to speak in this debate, because adult social care is an important issue in Fareham, where the average age of local residents is far higher than in most of the UK. Fareham has what is known as an ageing population.

First, I acknowledge the Government's commitment and progress on social care. We have seen considerable extra funding. Some £1.8 billion will be allocated for 2019-20 through the improved better care fund, which represents a 23% increase on the previous year. Also, £240 million of funding will be allocated to support adult social care services in order to reduce pressures on the NHS. For Hampshire, the additional amount for winter pressures equates to £4.7 million, and with the 3% social care precept that Hampshire levied in 2018-19 thanks to the greater flexibility provided by central Government, Hampshire has sufficient funds to meet the increased demand and pressure.

In Fareham, that translates into some excellent residential care homes, which I have had the pleasure to visit. Hawthorne Court, Gracewell, Hamble Heights, the Fernes at Titchfield and Abbeyfield are just a few examples of the frankly brilliant care provided for our elderly residents in Fareham. They are treated with dignity and compassion, and many of them are publicly funded. At Fareham Community Hospital—with which I have worked closely since my election in 2015, chairing the Fareham Community Hospital taskforce—we are seeing an expansion in GP services thanks to the collaboration of local surgeries, so that thousands of patients are able to see a GP on the day they request it. That is a massive improvement on previous years.

The charitable sector is also thriving in Fareham. I recently met representatives of Dementia Friendly Fareham and Dementia Friendly Hampshire. I know that my constituency neighbour, the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinéage), who is sitting on the Front Bench, has also met that charity. It is doing fantastic work to raise awareness in our local community—in our shopping centre, for example, and among young people and professionals—so that we can work more effectively and understand the challenges faced by those with dementia. I, too, have taken the Dementia Friends training. We are also seeing other charities, including One Community and the Fareham Good Neighbours scheme, helping elderly local residents to access healthcare services.

Those are real, tangible reflections of increased Government funding and the commitment from local communities, as well as of real progress at national and

local levels. All this has been achieved with Hampshire, and indeed Fareham, having one of the lowest council tax rates in the country. So, despite continued pressure and demand, Hampshire County Council and Fareham Borough Council have been able to maintain some excellence in the delivery of public services through prudent financial planning.

I need to provide some context here. That £4.7 million compares with an estimated growth of at least £10 million, at the same time as Hampshire County Council needs to remove £43 million from the adult health and care department to cope with £45 million of extra costs, mainly due to buying in care from the private market. That cost has gone up partly due to pressure from the national living wage. All of that combined means that Hampshire faces serious financial challenges on the horizon, and support will be needed through the spending review.

Despite the evidence of that undeniable progress, I also need to talk about the human impact when things sadly go wrong. I have now met too many residents in Fareham who have found the continuing healthcare application system nebulous, harsh and expensive. In some cases, this has been heartbreaking. My constituent, John White, came to see me about his experience of caring for his elderly sister-in-law who was suffering with Alzheimer's disease. Funding applications were initially rejected by the West Hampshire clinical commissioning group. There was a lack of co-ordination between the CCG and Hampshire County Council, and the appeals process was severely delayed. Only after six years of trying was funding retrospectively granted. Sadly, that was too late, as Mr White's sister-in-law had by that time passed away. Mr White's case is not an isolated one. The application process is not patient-friendly, and families and carers can be treated with suspicion rather than support. I am hearing from constituents that the process and rules are designed in such a way that only a few applications are successful at the first attempt. Many people simply do not have the energy to keep fighting the system and are beaten into submission.

I fully appreciate that the difficult financial circumstances in which the Government found themselves in 2010 are ultimately the root cause of the problems we see today. I am grateful to the Minister for Care, with whom I have raised Mr White's case, and to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), who has met Hampshire MPs and Hampshire County Council to discuss the county's funding, and I know how hard they are working to improve the system at central Government level. However, the process and the structure need urgent reform to improve co-ordination between healthcare providers and clinical commissioning groups and to improve patient experience. We need to act now, so that the Government's undeniable commitment to the elderly and vulnerable is not squandered and so that patients are rightly put at the heart of how our social care and NHS services are delivered. I have no doubt about this Government's commitment, and I know that we can do better.

4.25 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman). From listening to the speeches so far, this has been a sensible debate. Mental health and elderly care—two issues

close to my heart—have been discussed in a positive way, and I welcome the forthcoming Green Paper, particularly in how it relates to dementia care. Dementia is a ticking time bomb. We must grasp the issue because it will affect all our futures, and the funding to cope with it in a meaningful and measured way simply is not there yet.

However, I am here to talk about Hartlepool, which has been left behind like many seaside towns. There is a desperate need to improve housing, transport, business growth and job opportunities. Unfortunately, we have some of the most deprived wards in the country, with low life expectancy and fuel and food poverty. We have no fewer than nine foodbanks and, until recently, we topped the national table for the number of unemployed adults.

Following a year-long investigation into our coastal communities, the House of Lords' Regenerating Seaside Towns Committee recently concluded that places such as Hartlepool have been neglected for far too long, with money from successive Governments having been directed towards big towns and cities at their expense. The report quite rightly pointed to the negative effect that that has had on the economy of our once-thriving seaside towns and on the health, wellbeing and prospects of their people. It also concluded that, with the right investment, towns such as Hartlepool can be rejuvenated and once again become prosperous and desirable places to live and work.

I could not agree more with the Committee's findings and recommendations, and I will be pressing the Government to act upon them, but far from being the run-down, crime-ridden backwater portrayed on Channel 4's "Skint Britain", I must put it on the record that Hartlepool is a vibrant, welcoming place to which people choose to move despite the negative statistics and the town's negative portrayal by some. However, like in other coastal communities, the Labour council is struggling to maintain services despite its best efforts. In 2019-20, it faces 40% cuts across all departments and has for the first time been forced to use its reserves in order to balance the books and avoid job losses.

To be frank, the continued underfunding of councils such as Hartlepool's, the insistence that the majority of any settlement is ring-fenced for children's or social care, and the removal of the deprivation factor in calculating Government grant funding to areas with high levels of deprivation, such as Hartlepool, is driving them off a fiscal cliff. Services are at breaking point because of the constant cuts and the austerity agenda. Typically in places like Hartlepool, our elderly population is growing, with all the demands that brings from a public health and social care perspective.

Our children's services are also creaking at the seams, despite an award-winning children's services team. Council departments simply cannot cope with the growing demands on social care with stretched budgets. In Hartlepool, the rate of looked-after children is, thankfully, declining, but we have child poverty to cope with. We run holiday hunger schemes to keep our children from going hungry. We have schools that are desperately crying out for better funding to provide a good education in a safe and warm environment. We have no Sure Start centres, and youth provision has virtually gone.

Since 2010, local authority funding has been cut by £16 billion, which has clearly had a knock-on effect on services that my constituents expect and rely on. It is

not just services for the elderly and the young. Highways, parks, refuse collection, trading standards, libraries, the police and fire services are all affected by the chronic underfunding of local government, and the Government's threat to push the problem on to the council tax payer and, by default, let local councils take the blame is irresponsible.

Thanks to the efforts of our local Labour council, many services have been kept going, and the number of compulsory redundancies has been kept to a minimum, but at a time when the Lords point to the need for greater investment, the council is suffering death by a thousand cuts.

Hartlepool has created a care academy and aspires to have a centre of excellence. It is addressing respite care to free up beds in acute hospital wards and is tackling dementia care to fill a gap in the market with services run and owned by the public sector, but private sector providers, such as the owners of residential homes, are now ready to jump into that gap because we are not prepared to fund what is right under our nose. It makes me angry that innovative thinking to provide care for our citizens in their own community is not backed up by fair funding. The attacks on council funding need to stop, and fairer measures need to be introduced.

4.32 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I start by praising Chelmsford City Council, which has led the way in transforming Chelmsford into England's newest city. Last year, Chelmsford was ranked the No. 1 place to live in the east of England. We have a bustling high street full of new shops and restaurants, and we have a vibrant night life. We have just been ranked No. 1 in the country for our Pubwatch scheme, which is keeping people safe at night.

We have 13 green flag parks, and, a couple of weeks ago, one of our parks was chosen to be home to the national police dog memorial—do come and visit. The local council is working with the local police on investing in a community policing hub, which will have state-of-the-art CCTV, and they have co-invested in extra community policing that will help to support the over 300 extra police officers who have been added to Essex services.

We are building a new swimming pool, upgrading the museum and refurbishing the fantastic indoor market. We recently invested over £1 million in local charities to tackle homelessness, and we are building more than 1,000 new homes a year especially for local people. We are fighting for the infrastructure to go alongside that. As we have local government Ministers present, I give them an extra nudge to fund our much needed second railway station, which would unlock another 10,000 homes that we need.

Essex County Council does excellent work in many regards, especially children's services. It is the second largest children's services area in the whole country. Back in 2010, under the Labour Government, it was failing. It is now—since January—ranked outstanding. The investment in children's services has gone down from £148 million to £118 million, proving that when it comes to running outstanding facilities, money is not always the solution. The solution in this case was to use early intervention and targeted work, and to unlock local partnerships. I urge Members to read the Ofsted report.

[Vicky Ford]

Essex County Council is challenged. We have seen a great deal of population growth and increasing demand, particularly for social care. Adult social services make up about 45% of Essex County Council's spending. Over the next decade, we expect the number of over-80s to rise by two thirds and the number of over-90s to rise by 90%.

We need a new model for funding social services. It is simply not fair that those who win the lifetime lottery and live to be healthy, well and fit in their old age can, when they pass on, leave their assets to those they love; whereas those who become frail—especially those who suffer from dementia—and need care end up losing their assets, and they find that they cannot pass on such gifts to future generations. There have to be fairer models, and I encourage the Government to be brave in looking at different options, including those that work in other countries. I urge them to look at insurance schemes and lifetime saving schemes, and to try to find fairer ways to solve the problem.

I want to discuss dementia, because the great fact that we are living longer means that more people suffer from dementia. Some 850,000 people in the UK have dementia, and the cost of caring for them is £26 billion a year, but we know that that figure will rise. Across the world, there are 47 million people with dementia, and it is estimated that by 2050 the number will have risen to 135 million.

I am very glad that the Chair of the excellent Science and Technology Committee is in his seat. Along with a Conservative colleague, he and I spent the morning representing the Committee with the Alzheimer's Society and Alzheimer's Research UK at the Dementia Research Institute, which is the world's biggest single investment in dementia research. It was a great pleasure to meet those involved, who told us about the work that is being done to improve the day-to-day life of those with dementia. The UK leads in areas such as technological aids to make living with dementia easier, and it is doing great work on changing society's view and understanding of people with dementia. We learned that 500 people a week are becoming dementia friends, which is great.

We also learned that much more can be done to understand dementia and work towards a cure. In recent years, there have been 3.4 million publications on cancer in the UK alone. By comparison, there have been just 170,000 on dementia. In other words, for every piece of research into dementia, there have been 20 on cancer, even though dementia is the cause of far more death and suffering in later years. The amount of research is increasing, and it has resulted in a much greater understanding of what causes dementia. We understand that the causes start decades before the symptoms appear. To understand what causes dementia in somebody in their 70s, we need to understand the changes that start happening in our 40s and 50s.

We also heard that the UK is leading the world in research. We were told that a third of all dementia may be preventable, provided that it can be detected early. Early intervention can be used to understand the triggers and how to prevent it. As well as looking into how we care for those who are old and frail and need support, let us keep up the research into how we prevent that need.

Norman Lamb: I share the hon. Lady's view of the excellent Select Committee on which we both serve. We had a fascinating visit. Does she agree that, from what we heard this morning, there is a case not only for increasing investment in dementia research based on transforming the lives of people who currently suffer with dementia, but for investing to save? If we are to prevent the health and care system from bankrupting itself because of this increasing prevalence, we have to act now to reduce that prevalence by finding out how we can prevent dementia in future.

Vicky Ford: I absolutely agree. We heard it described earlier as like watching a tsunami way out to sea. People are living longer, which means that the number of people suffering from dementia around the world will increase unless we get ahead of the challenge. We cannot just keep watching it; we need to get ahead of the challenge to understand the causes. There will be cures, but only if the world continues to invest in the research. As well as investing in social care and finding a new model to help to provide it, let us keep up our world-leading research into Alzheimer's and other dementia-causing diseases and make sure that the UK continues to lead on that challenge, and let the Government invest more and get the rest of the world to do so, too.

4.41 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), particularly after listening to her account of what can be done to help to tackle dementia.

Like a number of other Members, I have had the honour of being a councillor: for 15 years, I served the people of Battle Hill ward, where I live, in North Tyneside. To this day, I am proud of everything that Labour councillors have achieved since North Tyneside came into being in 1974. Labour has been in power there for the majority of that time. I remain an ardent supporter of the council under our elected mayor, Norma Redfearn, and pay great attention to the council's finances, particularly as my husband Ray has served as the cabinet member for finance over the past six years.

Like councils up and down the country, North Tyneside has struggled over the past nine years, losing £120 million because of Government cuts. This year, the council has taken a £3.5 million cut, and more than £27 million in cuts are due over the next four years. Because of the cuts, North Tyneside's cabinet has been put in a difficult position with regard to preparing a balanced budget while bringing together the impact of reduced funding over successive years, as well as the additional unfunded burdens and demand-led pressures the council has faced.

A major problem has been the Government's assumption that councils will make the Government's suggested increase in council tax, because that suggested increase is taken into account when the council's baseline funding needs are assessed. Although the Government see bringing forward these council tax-raising powers in the settlement as a way of recognising the calls for urgent help for councils to tackle some of the immediate social care pressures they face, in practice it simply shifts the burden of tackling a national crisis on to councils, and ultimately on to their residents. Sadly, North Tyneside, with this burden placed on it, has, with great reluctance, increased council tax in this year's budget by 2.99%. That means

£30 extra a year for band A and more than £45 extra for band D, which is quite a sum for people who are already struggling to make ends meet.

Despite the rise in council tax, North Tyneside Labour Council continues to face the challenge of maximising the use of available resources to ensure that the borough continues to grow through investment and that essential services such as social care continue to be delivered. Achieving that balance becomes more and more difficult every year, and the council can see no easing of the relentless pressure to secure efficiencies in the current financial environment.

However, despite those challenges, North Tyneside continues to focus on achieving the overall policy objective shaped in “Our North Tyneside Plan”, which was put together by a mayor who listens to the people. The council is determined to continue to find a way to improve the lives of residents by making the council work smarter, putting people at the centre of what it does and ensuring that it maximises the way it uses public money to achieve residents’ priorities, which include delivering economic prosperity and good social care—priorities that came up time and again among our residents.

Like many other councils, North Tyneside has great staff, who are dedicated and work under extreme pressure. I am grateful for all that they do to help North Tyneside survive in the face of such stringent Government cuts. I ask the Minister when the Government will realise that councils across the country have reached breaking point. When will the Government restore funding to a level that enables our hard-working councillors and council staff to deliver the best possible services not just to the people of North Tyneside, but to the whole country as it is what the people expect and deserve?

Finally, I wish all the candidates standing in next week’s elections the best of luck, but I wish the very best of luck to all our Labour candidates, especially the one in North Tyneside.

4.46 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I wish to focus my contribution on the impact of local government cuts on tackling youth violence. We know that early intervention and prevention is key as is a public health approach, and I will come back to those points later on in my contribution.

Toby Perkins: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend, but I note that there is not a single Member of Parliament on the Government Benches. I just wondered whether the fire alarm had gone off and none of us on the Labour Benches had heard it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. Of course he knows that the occupation of the Benches is not a matter for the Chair. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who is temporarily not in his place, is making it clear that he is in the Chamber. So, too, is the Minister, the Whip, the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), and the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. None the less, I take the hon. Gentleman’s point. I say to him and to the Chamber that I have been a little more lenient than normal this afternoon about people—on both sides of

the Chamber—coming in and out of the Chamber and being absent for rather longer than I would normally find acceptable. This is a particularly busy week. There are many delegated legislation Committees and Select Committees sitting because the House did not sit on Easter Monday, so I have been a little more lenient than normal. That is one reason why there are fewer people in the Chamber than there might otherwise have been, but no one would like to give the impression to anybody watching that this has been anything other than a well-attended debate, with people making serious speeches. Every single speech that I have heard has been made by Members of this place who take their duties in their constituencies very seriously.

Vicky Foxcroft: My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) made a good point. This is an incredibly important debate, as we are discussing cuts to local authorities. I would also say that my contribution, in which I will talk about the impact of cuts on youth violence, is extremely important.

After the Prime Minister’s recent summit on serious violence, about which this Chamber is still awaiting a statement, the Government launched the “Consultation on a new legal duty to support a multi-agency approach to preventing and tackling serious violence.” Many of the words in this document are to be welcomed. However, local authorities are responsible for many of the services that the Government see as key to this multi-agency approach, and cuts of nearly £16 billion to local government since 2010—£165 million in Lewisham—have left our public services at breaking point, so hon. Members can see why so many are sceptical about the Government’s multi-agency strategy. There is a lot of promising language in the consultation, with mentions of following the evidence, focusing on the long term, and working “with and for communities”. It includes examples of best practice and advice from the World Health Organisation on violence reduction.

Violence is not inevitable; with the right approach, I truly believe that it is preventable. Obviously, we need Departments to work together to share data and generate long-term solutions. We hear all the time that this is not just an issue that the police can tackle alone. We need a strategy that brings together schools, social services, housing, police, youth services and the voluntary sector—one that follows the evidence and brings communities with us. Indeed, we need a public health approach. However, teachers and frontline NHS workers have expressed concerns about the proposed legal duty, and with fair reason. Over the last nine years, austerity has taken its toll. The NHS is suffering the biggest funding squeeze in its history. Schools budgets have been cut by £1.7 billion since 2015. Adding yet another responsibility on to the shoulders of our brilliant but overstretched teachers and NHS staff without further resources is unacceptable.

If hon. Members look at my own Borough of Lewisham, they will see the immense pressure that the council is already under. Since 2010, Lewisham has suffered cuts to its budget of more than 60%. Local schools have lost out on over £25 million of funding since 2015 and 14 schools are facing a shortfall in their budget as a result. Food bank use has been rising year on year. Last year, 7,000 families in Lewisham visited a food bank—yes, 7,000 families. Lewisham is one of the most deprived local authorities in England and one of the 20 local

[Vicky Foxcroft]

authorities with the highest levels of child poverty. At the same time, the local population has risen by 10% since the last census, adding yet more pressure to the council's dwindling budgets. That is the context we are talking about, with poverty rising, complex social needs rising and the local population rising, alongside unsustainable cuts to local services.

The Government's public health approach says that we should be bringing together law enforcement, education, health, housing and youth services. Councils want to do that, but they need the funding to achieve it. Youth services in the Borough of Lewisham have been cut by more than a third since 2012. As a result, centres are struggling to remain open and the year-round provision that we had in the past is just no longer possible. Our police are working hard with fewer resources, often putting themselves in danger to ensure that they keep us safe. Lewisham, Greenwich and Bexley police forces in south-east London have recently had to merge, resulting in the loss of 100 police officers. At the same time, we have lost several local police stations and more are at risk of closing soon. I know the police would prefer that that was not happening.

Councils such as Lewisham have had to be creative so that it can still deliver for local residents. Put simply, we previously had a service with 45 local community wardens and now there are 30 seeking to do the same job. That is on top of a reduction in the number of police community support officers. In the past, we had more than six community support officers per ward; they knew the local area well and had the capacity to build relationships with the community. That is no longer possible. Most of our wards are left with just one community officer, and that is a picture we are seeing across London.

There is a familiar story in our schools. On average, Lewisham schools will suffer an estimated loss of almost £26 million between 2015 and 2020, equivalent to £319 per pupil, and most teachers are now teaching classes of well over 30 pupils. School exclusions are rising, too—speaking of which, when will we get the Timpson review of school exclusions? I have asked that several times in this Chamber.

Also notably absent from the Government's consultation is early years—a worrying, but not surprising, oversight. Sure Start centres have been cut across the country, and Lewisham is no exception. In 2010, the borough had 19 children's centres; only five are left today. Early years support is crucial to a public health approach. How else can we implement early intervention? Is it not time that the Government provided maintained nursery schools, with the sustainable funding they need to keep their doors open?

I wanted to end on a more positive note. We in Lewisham are lucky to have a Labour council led by a brilliant mayor. In spite of all the cuts, Lewisham Labour is committed to implementing a public health approach to tackle violence. It plans to lead a truly community-led approach, and has already started by consulting Lewisham's vibrant community groups and voluntary organisations. Our local government has a huge part to play in tackling violence and it is reassuring that the Government have recognised that. The Government are using all the right language, but now is the time to follow through with the necessary funding that our services have been without for far too long.

We talk about following the evidence, but where is the evidence that a programme run in a school teaching kids, "Don't carry a knife, because you won't be safe," actually works? If we want to talk about true evidence, we have to build our young children's resilience; we have to teach them to realise how fantastic they will be in the future and give them the skills to do that. That means investing in Sure Start early childhood centres, in our schools and in youth work. Our young people deserve that—they deserve the futures we all want for them. I urge the Government to fund local authorities properly, so that they can deliver.

4.57 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): As we have heard in the accounts given by many of my hon. Friends today, for many communities in this country local government funding is a matter of life and death—a matter of keeping vital services open and making sure that the most vulnerable people in our society are given the protection and support they need to survive. That is the scale of the crisis afflicting our local authorities—a crisis that we know hits the poorest the hardest.

Nine of the 10 most deprived councils in England face cuts that are higher than the national average. All nine are Labour controlled. Seven of the 10 areas facing the smallest cuts to spending power per household are Conservative controlled. Is it not telling that after nine years of savage cuts to local government, fraying the very fabric of our society, the Tory party is campaigning in the upcoming local elections on its record on road maintenance? The Conservatives boast proudly of "A few less bumps in the road". Consider that for a moment. Local authorities are housing 79,000 homeless families in temporary accommodation, including more than 120,000 children; last year saw the biggest annual increase in children in care since 2010, and councils start 500 child protection investigations every day—but the Tories want to talk about fixing potholes.

We have now seen almost a decade of deprivation engineered by Tories in Westminster. The Conservative party proudly talks of its record on fixing bumps in the road while our communities are starved of spending and our services are cut to the bone. What an insult to the dementia patient who cannot access adequate social care, to the family who cannot find themselves a home or to the schoolchildren sent home early for a lack of funding. Does that not sum up the warped priorities of this failing Government?

I commend the Labour councils across the country, which are doing their best to stand up for our communities in the teeth of savage Tory cuts. Voters face a blunt choice in the upcoming local elections between those who want to destroy our communities and those who want to rebuild them for the many.

5 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): First, I would like to pay tribute to the fabulous work of the council staff in my area and the local councillors of the Conservative party, independents and others, who work so hard to deliver excellent services for our community.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) made the point that the previous Labour Government moved funding from shire constituencies

to metropolitan areas. As a resident of both South Kesteven and Westminster, I thought it would be useful to illustrate the difference between the two. In South Kesteven District Council area, the average weekly gross wage is £453.20, and the council tax for a band D property is £1,589.38 a year. In Westminster, where I am during the week, the average weekly wage is £786.10, and band D council tax is £710.50. This means that the average person in Westminster is earning more than £300 a week more but pays £879 less in council tax for their local services.

Despite the challenges to funding and the fact that if Lincolnshire County Council were funded the same per capita as the average council in the country, it would receive £116 million more than its current budget of roughly £500 million, it has been able to do some very innovative things with its funding. We have discussed the environment a lot this week. South Kesteven District Council introduced “The Big Clean” initiative last year, which visits each village of the district to remove fly-tipping, clean signs, remove undergrowth and do other things suggested by the local residents to improve the environment in which people live and ensure that they can take pride in their surroundings.

Gravity Fields festival, which has been running since 2012, is an innovation of our local council. This goes beyond delivering the basic services; this is the best in the country. It is a festival of art and science inspired by Sir Isaac Newton, who was from Grantham and went to the local school. The festival not only provides the people of Grantham with information on art and science and very interesting experiences, but it raises £1 million for the local area through visitors staying there and spending their money on food and drink and the like. This is a Conservative council doing its best to deliver really innovative stuff, despite having a stretched budget.

North Kesteven District Council, which covers the other part of my constituency, is similar. It has looked carefully at the challenge of being good to the environment while providing the social housing that is required. It has won awards for building curved homes and passive houses, delivering the next generation of social housing in an environmentally sustainable way. It is not only providing basic services but going above and beyond, to provide excellent services. Lincolnshire County Council receives lower than the average per capita funding, as I have said, but it is still providing our children and young people with what Ofsted describes as “strong and effective” services for those with special educational needs and disabilities.

The ageing population presents one of our nation’s most profound challenges. It raises critical questions about how, as a society, we enable all adults to live well in later life and how we deliver sustainable public services to support them to do so. There will be 2 million more people aged over 75 in the next 10 years, and many of those will be managing long-term conditions. It is vital to make sure that local councils are supported to provide for elderly citizens so that they can age with dignity. That is why I am glad this Conservative Government have invested in social care, with a 23% increase in the improved better care fund to £1.8 billion, an additional £410 million through the social care support grant and £10 billion for adult social care being provided to councils by 2020.

I really welcome the additional resources that have been provided for social care by this Government, but as a Member representing a rural constituency it is important for me to emphasise that an extra £1 for social care in London will go further than an extra £1 in Lincolnshire. Rural areas face higher costs for the delivery of public services than urban areas. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) says from a sedentary position, “That’s not true”, but if one is visiting an elderly person in their home and then travelling on to visit the next elderly person in their home, there is of course a gap.

Andrew Gwynne: I am not saying that is not true; the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government’s own report says it is not true.

Dr Johnson: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but it seems to me that rural shires often have Conservative-led local authorities that provide their services more efficiently. In practice, if we ask a carer to go out to visit three elderly people in a morning, for example, and those houses are very close together, as they may be in Westminster, they will be able to visit, spend longer with them and have lower travel costs than they would if they had to visit three houses in my constituency, which covers 433 square miles and is all within the same county council.

As I was saying, when it comes to social care, this problem is in large part due to both the demographics and the distances involved. As I have said, my constituency spans 433 square miles and has a low population density, and there are longer travel distances for staff to deliver care. Furthermore, Sleaford and North Hykeham, as a rural area, has a higher number of older residents. Those older residents have worked hard their entire lives and now need support from our public services to ensure that they can maintain a higher quality of life.

However, this is not all about funding. Actually, I think it is sad that so much of the debate has focused almost entirely on who is going to provide the most money, while only a little bit has been on how to pay for it, and not so much on innovation and quality of care. The important thing is not shouting about who can spend the most money, but who can deliver the best outcomes and provide the best care for people, because that is surely what everybody on both sides of the House wants.

Last year, there was the launch of the National Centre for Rural Health and Care in Lincolnshire. This is a grouping of the NHS, the University of Lincoln, Health Education England, Public Health England and the East Midlands Academic Health Science Network. This pioneering group will look at improving how we deliver care in local areas.

There is also the social care and digital innovation programme, which is run by NHS Digital. This gives money for local projects, so somebody with a local project that they think could improve care for residents, if they had a little bit of start-up funding to test it, could receive money to support the design and trial of digital solutions to improve care and provide value for money. Previous projects include an exoskeleton device in the Isle of Wight to give people greater independence, and the provision of Amazon Alexa in Hampshire to help people to maintain independent living.

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

There are other projects, too. In Cornwall, Peninsula Community Health Services is looking at how to prevent pressure sores. We know that 500,000 people in this country develop a pressure sore every year. These are excruciatingly painful, can become infected and, in the worst cases, can lead to such a serious infection that the patient dies. The continuous pressure monitoring technology devices will be able to help people identify hotspots even before the skin damage occurs and prevent that from happening. That is an investment in something that, overall, will not just improve patient care but save money.

The Leeds Care Record looks at how information can be shared—data protection means that in some cases it is difficult to share information held by hospitals and GPs—and how referrals are made. When I first qualified as a doctor, all the letters were dictated and signed, but now they are typed and sent electronically. Cumbria, for example, saves £400,000 a year by sending referrals electronically. That also saves time, which means not only saving money but improving the efficiency of the service delivered to patients.

I am glad that the Government acknowledge the need to change the outdated funding formula, which has failed accurately to recognise the discrepancy in need between urban and rural areas; that need is often hidden in rural areas. As Ministers review the consultation findings, I hope they will ensure that the new funding formula adequately takes that into account.

Finally, as a member of the Conservative party, which has long been the best custodian of the public finances, I say that it is imperative that money is spent both wisely and efficiently. The issue of social care goes much wider than just funding. Despite the challenges facing local councils, I have seen at first hand how the brilliant work by North and South Kesteven District Councils and Lincolnshire County Council can support the people in my constituency and make our resources go as far as possible.

5.11 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I will address most of my remarks to the issue of social care and the challenge we face, but first I want to highlight a real concern that other hon. Members have also expressed. The funding constraints on local government have had a very big impact on preventive services that are designed to stop extra costs being incurred at a later stage through a failure of the system.

I will give one or two examples. The Select Committee on Science and Technology recently conducted an inquiry into the impact of adversity in childhood, looking in particular at trauma, abuse or neglect in early years. We know that if we intervene early and follow the evidence of what is effective in stopping trauma becoming entrenched, we can not only transform lives but save a fortune further down the track.

The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) said something about the Conservative party being the custodians of careful finance, but we are seeing significant reductions in investment in preventive services, which end up costing the state a fortune further down the line. Too often, children who experience trauma, abuse or neglect in early years and who do not get the

support they need end up being excluded from school, and the track through to the criminal justice system is all too real. Educational attainment is, therefore, often lower than it should be, and worklessness often follows. The disinvestment over the past few years in those preventive early years services, supporting parents and so on, has been a very stupid thing to do, because it will cost the state far more in years to come.

When the Chancellor launched the Budget a few weeks ago, it was encouraging to hear him say that he was willing to invest in early intervention where there was evidence of its effectiveness. Well, there is evidence of its effectiveness, so the Chancellor needs to make that investment.

Toby Perkins: I have huge respect for the right hon. Gentleman's knowledge in this area, but he is talking about overall local government spending cuts and he was, of course, a part of the first five years of this Government. The greatest austerity and local government cuts were made under a Liberal Democrat and Tory coalition, so does he regret his part in the huge cuts made to local government between 2010 and 2015?

Norman Lamb: If we are honest, every Government have some responsibility. The reductions started before 2010. I absolutely accept—[*Interruption.*] Let me address this point; I am trying to be straight with the hon. Gentleman. I think mistakes were made by the coalition Government in terms of the hit local government took during that period. The contrast between the support for the NHS by increasing investment in real terms and the cut to social care does not make sense, but that is what happened. I recognise that. It was above my pay grade, but I do not think it was the right decision to make. I hope that that is of some help to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): My right hon. Friend makes some really important points about the first 1,000 days of life, but equally there are similar arguments relating to the end of life. For example, too many people who need social care end up in a much more expensive place at the end of their life—in a hospital setting, where they do not want to be—for the want of the right investment in social care. Does he agree that we should apply the principle of investing to save across the whole of life?

Norman Lamb: I absolutely recognise and accept that point.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) intervened to challenge the point about spending under the coalition Government. There was a crisis in public finances in 2010 which did have to be addressed, but I do accept that the balance between social care and the NHS was not optimal. I also want to address other areas where the underinvestment or disinvestment in preventive services has borne a heavy cost.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who has done very good work on youth violence—I have been part of the commission looking at that—made the point that many of the preventive services that are there, particularly during teenage years, to stop the risk of young people slipping into gang violence have been stripped away in many of the poorest communities. Again, the impact of that has, at least in

part—it is very hard to judge cause and effect—been an increase in violence on our streets at the awful and dreadful cost to many of those affected by it.

I want to turn specifically to social care. It is worth reflecting on why social care is so important. It is there to give people the chance of a happy life and a good life, as far as they are able to enjoy that if they are struggling with a range of conditions. It is there to help people to remain independent in old age, to support people so that they do not end up needing the NHS, with an enormous impact on their wellbeing. One of the problems we face is that unless you or a family member experiences the need for social care, it is hidden from view. Very many families across our country simply do not see the impact of the underfunding of social care today, but it is very real. There are over 1 million older people who are not getting the care they need. As Simon Stevens, the chief executive of the NHS, has pointed out on many occasions, if people do not get social care support, that has an impact on the NHS. The funding settlement for the NHS simply will not work unless we address the under-resourcing of social care.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman knows more about social care than anyone else in this House—I pay him that compliment. Does he accept that one of the most unfair issues is where local authorities have moved people with learning disabilities out to cheaper parts of the country—Gloucestershire being a classic case—and their care needs get worse over time? The local authority that moved them out says, “It’s not our problem; it is the problem of the local authority to which they have moved”. Does he agree that that is why we need a national care service?

Norman Lamb: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the issue of how we care for people of a younger age who have care needs, particularly those with learning disabilities and autism. What happens too often is that those people end up in institutions when they do not need to be there, often away from home and at enormous cost to the public purse. Again, the evidence from around the country shows that where this is done well and where families are supported to keep someone at home, helping them through crises, we not only reduce the cost to the public purse but have a massive impact on their wellbeing. He is also right to highlight the fact that we end up with awful disputes about who is responsible for payment as people are shunted around the country in a way that, in my view, fundamentally breaches their human rights.

Barbara Keeley: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman is talking about this topic. It is absolutely vital, but does he regret the extent to which the Government now seem to have abandoned the transforming care programme? There seems to be no future for it. From the time when he was a Minister, there was a programme to deal with the issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) raised, but there now appears to be an abandonment of targets and an abandonment of the future of that programme, and certainly no funding to make it work.

Norman Lamb: I am deeply concerned about the future—or lack of a future—of the transforming care programme. One of the problems is that it is often NHS England that is funding care in an institution, and when

a local authority is under financial stress, there is not much of an incentive to take that person out of the institution and make them the responsibility of the local authority. There has to be a way of funding the building of infrastructure to support people in the community. That is what has failed to happen so far.

This is not a static issue that we face. There is growing pressure. We are all living longer, often with chronic conditions that in the past used to kill us. That is a great triumph of man and womankind, but there is a cost attached, yet we have no mechanism to address the increasing funding needs of social care and, in particular, dementia.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), one of the valued members of the Science and Technology Committee, made the point that the cost to society of dementia is about £26 billion every year, but that is going to rise dramatically. Whatever we say about spending money efficiently—I completely agree about the need to spend money efficiently and to innovate and do things in a more effective way—the dramatic rise in demand inevitably means that we will have to spend more as a society on supporting people with dementia and on research to find cures for dementia.

Tom Brake: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Norman Lamb: I will briefly, but I am having glowers directed at me by you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Tom Brake: Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the ways of supporting people who need care, such as dementia sufferers, is to support their carers, and that there is a very important role for organisations such as the Sutton Carers Centre in providing support to the network of carers who support people with dementia and others with long-term conditions?

Norman Lamb: I very much agree, and those organisations do incredibly important work.

I want to mention the Care Act 2014, which I was responsible for taking through Parliament. I think it was widely regarded as good legislation, but I fear that it has been undermined by a failure to commit sufficient resources to really realise the transformation that it was designed to achieve in personalising care and putting the individual at the heart of everything that local authorities do. In particular, we legislated for a cap on care costs in that Act, but as soon as the Conservatives got rid of the Lib Dems from the coalition, that commitment was abandoned. All the work that we did in consulting and legislating for a cap on care costs to protect people from catastrophic cost has been lost. Of course, we know that in the 2017 general election the Prime Minister paid dearly for that politically, because the replacement proposal was sorely lacking and amounted, in many people’s eyes, to a tax on dementia.

I am conscious that you want me to shut up very soon, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I want to say something very briefly on future funding. It seems to me that if we are to achieve a sustainable settlement, we have to work on a cross-party basis and the Government have to embrace that. The motion still prompts the question of where the money is going to come from—it does not answer that question.

[Norman Lamb]

There are a range of solutions. My party and I have proposed a dedicated health and care tax that would appear on people's pay packets so that everyone could see where the money was going, and which would be informed by an independent assessment, perhaps every five years, of how much the health and care system needed. It would take the politics out of the calculation of how much the care system needs. Then the parties could argue about whether they were prepared to meet those needs through an increase in that dedicated tax.

If we are to solve this, it will require political will. There has been a failure of the political class, not just in the last few years but ever since the late '90s, when a royal commission established by the then Labour Government came up with proposals that were never implemented. It has been kicked in and out of the long grass ever since, and we are still waiting for a solution. It is time we found one, because we are letting down too many people in our country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. A lot of people still wish to speak, and we are working on the basis of 10 minutes for each speaker. If Members go over that, it will affect people lower down the order, so please can we try to help each other?

5.25 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who, as we all know, has great knowledge in this area. I am pleased he acknowledged in response to my intervention that the Government the Liberal Democrats were part of got the balance wrong in local government funding. I am very conscious of that fact, having spent a lot of time talking about local government elections in the last week or so back in Chesterfield, where it is hard to find a Liberal Democrat who will own up to the Government their party was a part of. They seem to have disowned their record entirely.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) made the point that in this time of austerity the worst hit area of government has been local government. It has been utter cowardice for the Government to say, "There are going to be huge cuts, but we're not going to decide where they'll fall, because we're going to pass on that decision to local authority leaders. It will be for them to decide whether to shut a library, close a park or stop investing in roads. We're going to outsource the pain". I think of the many people who first became councillors after the 2015 elections, or even the 2013 elections. They were so excited to be councillors, but at their very first council meeting they were faced with the decision of what to shut. That has been the reality for many local authorities.

It is absolutely right that the motion tabled by my hon. Friends should focus on that unfairness. I have referred previously to the fact that Chesterfield has had a 43.2% cut, whereas the Secretary of State's local authority has had a cut of just 12%. The right hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) spoke up for that, saying the problem with the Labour Government was that they sent all the money to the poor areas. I am

proud that a Labour Government made those decisions and recognised the role that local authorities can play in supporting the most deprived in our society.

As I said, I have been in Chesterfield talking about the local elections. I am proud of the record of the local authority in Chesterfield. It has recognised that in a time of austerity and unfair cuts from central Government it has had to make innovative choices to enable us to provide better services that cost less. It invested in a new leisure centre and found that the amount by which it had to subsidise it fell from £1.5 million—the figure in every year under the Liberal Democrats—to only £300,000 a year, as more people were using it because it had better facilities. Similarly, the council invested in our cultural facilities, meaning the theatre and concert venue saw a 60% reduction in the amount by which it had to be subsidised, since it was getting more punters through the door because it had better facilities.

We have fewer empty shop units than most other local authority areas of a similar sort. The council has done very innovative things, such as bringing a big wheel into the centre of Chesterfield, which massively increased the number of people visiting the town centre, and it has an innovative record on tackling homelessness. There was an excellent remembrance display to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 1914-18 conflict, featuring poppy cascades not just from the town hall but from a variety of retail units. The council has recognised that it is sometimes necessary for local authorities to invest in order to save money and to be innovative if people are to be proud of them, but at the same time it has managed to maintain the lowest level of council tax in Derbyshire.

We know that Labour councils cost you less. The average cost per household in Labour council areas is £351 less than the average in Tory areas. The authorities that have been most likely to go bust are Tory authorities in, for instance, Northamptonshire and Surrey. Not only does Labour run its councils better than the Tories, but its councils cost less and innovate more. I am very proud of the record that I will be going out to defend.

I want to say something about social care, because I know a great deal about it. I spent a very tough year of my career as care manager of a private provider of domiciliary care for Sheffield City Council. One aspect of social care that is missing from the whole debate is the fact that it is set up as an industry rather than a service. The vast majority of domestic care providers are private sector businesses, and the vast majority of care homes are run by the private sector. The No. 1 priority of the private sector is to make a profit, and we should not be surprised that if we involve private sector companies in care homes, they will try to make a profit out of them. That, ultimately, is what companies exist for.

Councils often involve the private sector because they are trying to save money, and they recognise that the terms and conditions on which local authority staff will work will be more generous than those in the private sector. That is one of the knock-on consequences of the overall spending pressure on councils. The relationship between councils and their providers is very important. Far too often, councils outsource responsibility for these services, signing up to contracts that anyone who studies them must know are unsustainable. They must have some responsibility for the decisions that they make.

As one who has worked with carers, I take my hat off to those who work in the care industry. I know that they are among the most dedicated and professional of people, often working in incredibly difficult circumstances for an absolute pittance. I know that whether they wear a uniform with a local authority badge on it or work for a private company, they have a real commitment to the people for whom they provide care. However, we are seeing an industry in crisis. More than 100 care homes have gone bust in the last two years or so, and dozens of domestic care providers are going bust as well. In 2018 Allied Healthcare, the company for which I used to work, was days away from bankruptcy. Every time a care home goes bust, the onus falls on the local authority again.

The Government need to understand that given the scale of cuts that we have seen over the last nine years, with a single year's uplift and the ring-fencing of the small amount of £2.5 billion—it is not actually a small amount, but it is inadequate in comparison with the cuts of previous years—they cannot, as the Minister did earlier, wash their hands of the fact that the industry is in crisis and businesses are going bust. That means 15-minute appointments. It means dementia patients seeing a different carer every day, although consistency of care is so important. It means a decline in the service that they receive. It means families seeing that their relatives are deeply troubled by the inconsistency of the services that they are receiving. It means local authorities saying that they will not pay for travelling time, and that responsibility falling back on to the companies.

The courts have recently decided that those who provide sleepovers should be paid the national minimum wage. Many care companies did not previously pay it. I support that decision, but the corollary must be the Government's recognition that while local authorities were previously tendering on the basis that those who slept on the job could be paid on a different basis, it has now been retrospectively decided that authorities must pay private providers. Money must now come from central Government to fund that, because businesses will continue to go bust and the services on which people rely will continue to be diminished.

All the cuts to care have consequences. When care services are not available, people turn up in A&E. Some 20% of the people in A&E should be in a hospital bed but cannot get admitted. At the same time, 20% of hospital beds are filled by people who cannot get out because there is no care package waiting for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) spoke about the impact of cuts to children's social care falling on children with special needs and on schools. Things like the failure to diagnose autism have a knock-on impact right across the school and other areas. All these services are connected; we cannot look at social care and local government finances in isolation.

I met the managing director of One to One, a company in my constituency that provides excellent care services to many local authorities, who told me about the knock-on consequences and the impact that local authority funding cuts are having on its ability to get paid. The company is often owed tens of thousands of pounds by local authorities that are struggling to manage their administration.

The industry is in crisis and local government is in crisis. The Government have two choices: they either step up to the mark and convince us that they are serious about the social care funding crisis, or they

continue in the way they are going, in which case everyone will realise that this is something that lands at their door.

5.36 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins).

Let me start by highlighting to those who are watching the debate across the nation that we are debating local council funding because it is an Opposition day. The Conservative party has continued to delay, distract and sometimes even destroy any meaningful conversation on Brexit, as a result jeopardising the discussions on other issues that are faced by people across our communities and constituencies. I therefore thank the shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for the leadership he has shown on this matter.

As we have heard, by 2020 local authorities will have faced a reduction in core funding from the Government of nearly £16 billion since 2010. That means that councils will have lost 60p out of every £1 the Government used to provide for spending on local services. In Bradford over the past 10 years, we have seen huge cuts to our local council funding. In 2010, we received more than £500 million. In 2019, we received just under £400 million. On average, that is a loss of £750 per household across the city of Bradford.

Conservative Members may want to turn the debate into a conversation about spending formulas, but the reality on the ground is clear. We do not need statistics to tell us about the growing levels of deprivation in our constituencies. The stark reality can be seen in the lack of properly funded services, the non-existent youth services, the reduction in bobbies on the beat, the oversized classes and overcrowded classrooms, and the decline in living standards faced by the poorest in our communities.

I ask the Minister: what do I say to the young people in my constituency? It has one of the youngest populations in Europe, with 30% of Bradfordians being under the age of 20, yet it has among the highest levels of youth unemployment. How do I tell the younger generation that they do not have access to the youth services that were there before because we now have a Tory Government in power? How do I explain to them that because they have a Labour council, the Government disproportionately play politics with their life opportunities?

The facts speak for themselves: Bradford appears in the list of the top five councils to receive the biggest cuts to their total spending power over the past 10 years. Why is it that eight of the 10 councils that have received the largest cuts are under Labour control, while eight of the 10 councils that have received the smallest cuts are under Conservative control? I say today loudly and clearly: this Government have played party politics with Brexit, but we will not sit by silently as they play politics with the lives of people who vote Labour and the lives of our other constituents. The Government should protect all citizens equally, and it is frankly unacceptable that my constituents and many others are being left worse off by this Government. The people of this country are watching, and, with the local elections on their way, they will know which party stands for their best interests.

I was listening to the Minister earlier when he was giving out statistics and saying how the Government had done this and done that. The truth is that they have

[Naz Shah]

this April failed for a fifth time to publish their Green Paper on health and social care. How can any council have confidence in this Government when they hide behind the Brexit shambles to avoid dealing with the issues that are pertinent to our communities? What kind of decisions do the Government want our councils to make in 2019 when we do not have enough money? Do they want them to cut social care? Do they want them to cut children's services? Or do they want them to cut bin collections, which have already dropped down to once a fortnight?

The upcoming fair funding review is a proper stitch-up. It threatens to make the funding situation even worse, as it proposes to remove deprivation as a factor in its core funding calculations. Let me tell the Minister this: removing deprivation as a core issue in the funding formula will be absolutely devastating. She should come to Bradford West; I will show her what deprivation really is. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has already warned that removing deprivation in that way would result in moving resources from the more deprived councils to the less deprived, predominantly Conservative-controlled suburban and rural councils. How is that fair and equal?

These cuts have not hit all councils equally. Analysis from the Commons Library shows that, since 2010, Tory areas have had a far smaller reduction in spending power per household as a percentage and in cash terms. Government policy has led to an increased dependency on council tax as a funding mechanism, leading to a postcode lottery and hitting deprived families hardest. Households in Labour areas pay an average of £351 less in council tax. How can this Government be okay with the deprivation in Bradford West and places like it? We need to elect as many Labour councillors as possible on 2 May to stand up against these unfair Tory cuts. The people of this country are watching, as I have said. They know which party stands for their best interests. If the Conservatives are so confident, let them close their eyes when they look at the polls and call a general election. We on this side of the House are ready to give this country the Government it deserves.

5.42 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah). She is a doughty champion for her constituents, and she made the point incredibly powerfully that taking deprivation out of the local government funding calculation is absolutely shameful. It is constituencies like hers and mine that will suffer the brunt of that, and I pay tribute to her for her words.

Redcar and Cleveland has had a raw deal over the past nine years. I have lost count of the number of times I have stood up here in this Chamber to talk about the unfair and disproportionate cuts that areas such as mine have suffered. As we have said, it is the deprived areas that are not getting the funding and support that they need. We have had a big debate this afternoon about how much money is in the pot and whose fault it is that there is not enough, but this is not just about how much money is available for local government; it is about how it is distributed. It was clear from the evidence given by my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and

Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and from some Conservative MPs that the funding has been shifted under this Government. It has been moved from the areas that need it most to areas that are doing fine. There is a deep unfairness and flaw in the funding system as it stands.

Redcar and Cleveland has now lost £90 million since 2010. That is £662 per person; each of my constituents has lost £662. On top of that, they have had to pay more through precepts in social care and policing, yet they have still lost 500 police officers and they are still getting worse services. They are paying twice. My constituents are among the poorest. We still have council tax based on 1991 housing prices, but areas such as mine have not seen house prices rise; the value of my constituents' assets has not risen. They are still paying a deeply regressive council tax that is proportionately much tougher on them than it is on many others throughout the country. They are paying more through precepts and getting less from their services. That is simply not fair.

My council has lost a third of its central Government funding. How on earth can it be expected to continue to deliver the standards of service that people want? I pay tribute to Sue Jeffrey, the leader of the Labour-run Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, which has continued to do amazing work to defend our constituents and to provide fantastic opportunities and events for people who come to the area. The council has continued to provide the services that many people need and has done so without leaving behind the most vulnerable. I also pay tribute to Amanda Skelton and to all the council staff who work so hard.

Redcar and Cleveland does struggle, however. We have high levels of deprivation and child poverty. We have higher unemployment than most of the country and lower health and wellbeing outcomes. As a seaside town in a former industrial area, we have an increasingly ageing population. On top of all that, we had an economic shock in 2015 following the loss of 3,000 jobs after the closure of the steelworks, which had a huge knock-on effect on public services in the local area. This is not just about the devastating personal tragedies of those who lost their jobs, because there was another knock-on effect in terms of higher dependency on benefits and more insecure and poorly paid work. The average salary of someone who worked at the steelworks has declined by £10,000, and many people had to move away to look for work. The effect of all that on our communities, high streets and towns has been devastating, and the local authority lost £10 million in business rates following the closure of the steelworks on top of the funding cuts about which we have already heard.

As I said, despite the funding pressures, our council has continued to do a really good job, and I am incredibly proud of it. It has protected services for the vulnerable and has kept our libraries and leisure centres open. It has tried really hard to invest in our town and village centres, with a particular focus on economic development. For example, Eston has received £2 million over the past two years, with a further £1 million coming for its precinct. An award-winning employment and training hub has been established, getting over 1,000 people into work in just 18 months. The hub sprang out of crisis following the loss of the steelworks, but it has been innovative, going right into our most deprived communities and supporting people who may not have had a CV before, to get them the necessary training and experience

to get into employment. I am incredibly proud of that groundbreaking work. There are plans to invest £40 million in the regeneration of the iconic Regent Cinema on the seafront and a further £95 million to create 4,500 jobs, so our local authority is working hard and doing its best. Redcar has a bright future, but we are doing things locally and we are doing them ourselves.

Social care is the big theme of today's debate, and we know that it represents the biggest pressure on local authority spending. It is projected that over-65s will make up a quarter of Redcar and Cleveland's population by 2030, so we have an ageing demographic. While it is fantastic that children with complex needs and conditions and older adults are living longer, that means greater costs. As others have said, it is ridiculous that we are still waiting for the social care Green Paper, which has been postponed five times since 2017. This Government have no vision for the future of social care, and strategy and direction are sorely lacking.

Faced with that vacuum, local leaders are again stepping forward, taking up the mantle and trying to deal with the crisis. Redcar and Cleveland is seeing fantastic innovation, such as the intermediate care centre that will open later this spring, and we have invested in specialist support, including a recovery and independence team that goes out to support people in their homes. I am also proud of Redcar's Care Academy. We know that jobs in the sector are underfunded and have a high turnover, so hopefully the academy will ensure that such roles are highly skilled and valued going forward.

We are using the money that we have, although it is not enough, to deliver better care for residents, but that is no substitute for proper investment. Unfortunately, inadequate care means that too many people are having to step into caring roles. We rely upon an army of unpaid family members—overwhelmingly women—who are taking care of their relatives. Many of them have to give up work to take up that role, and many of them are older people, as we have heard today. A huge burden has been placed on them, and we must do more to help by looking after their loved ones and taking away that burden.

That is where the money should be going but instead, in the past few weeks, we have seen £4 billion spent on no-deal preparations when the Government have completely acknowledged that we were never going to have a no deal—it was some crazy, ridiculous pretence at a negotiation. If Labour had won the election in 2017, we would have invested double that in social care. That is where money should be going in this country. We would have brought in a living wage for carers, we would have ended 15-minute care visits and we would have increased carer's allowance. That is exactly the sort of thing a Government who care about the many, not the few, would be looking at. Instead, we are wasting money by frittering it away on the Tory soap opera of Brexit.

Labour Members want to tackle the burning injustices in our communities, and we want to help those most in need. We need a Government who will invest in social care for the 21st century without forcing elderly people into selling or remortgaging their home, who will support families to secure the care their relatives need, who will support families to cope with disadvantage, and who will prevent children from having to be taken into care. We need a system that preserves dignity and quality of life in old age.

Councils are at breaking point, yet we see Labour councils out there defending the most vulnerable, striving hard for their communities and creating safe and decent places to live, but communities like mine are being left behind by austerity. We have had enough warm words; we need investment in local government and fairness in distribution. No more austerity, no more cuts.

5.51 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley).

I start by thanking and paying tribute to all the frontline care staff around the country, and to all the family carers, informal carers and those working extremely hard in voluntary services in all our constituencies. In my constituency, I pay tribute to Dartmouth Caring, Totnes Caring, Brixham Does Care, South Brent and District Caring, and Kingsbridge and Saltstone Caring. I know that similar voluntary services are working across the country in tandem with the NHS to provide excellent care to our constituents, but they are under pressure as never before.

There is a devastating impact on those affected—those who are not getting the care services they need; not only working-age adults but older adults, and their families. There is also an impact on the NHS. If people cannot access care services, there is not only an impact on their dignity, mobility and wellbeing but they are much more likely to end up in hospital—a place they do not want to be and at much higher cost—sometimes with serious illnesses or injuries that could have been avoided by better prevention and early intervention.

We need to deal with this issue, and the House needs to appreciate the scale of the challenge. Let us look at the demographics. We know from the Office for National Statistics that, last year, 18% of our population nationally was aged over 65, but that in 14 years' time 23% of our population nationally will be over 65. Of course it is a good thing that people are living longer, but they are living longer with multiple disabilities and we need to be prepared for that. We need to be prepared not only for the scale of the shortfall we face right now but for what is coming in the future. When we talk about social care funding, we need not only to acknowledge the impact of the shortfall we have here and now, and how we are going to deal with it, but to plan seriously for what is coming down the track.

In my constituency, we are already there. My constituency has a much older population than in many parts of the country and, even when they can afford to pay for care, people cannot find the workforce to care for them. There is a real crisis in our social care workforce, which needs investment. We need to value and nurture that workforce. We know what works, but we also know it will require serious investment.

I am afraid that one of the features of such debates is that the blame bounces backwards and forwards when, in fact, cross-party working and consensus building is what is really needed. The funding choices we face are difficult. I agree with the hon. Member for Redcar, who highlighted why this cannot all be funded at a local level. Doing so just widens inequality, because the areas that are least able to pay have the greatest need. It is unrealistic for everything to come from a local level, so we need to work towards a national solution to the problem.

[Dr Sarah Wollaston]

The Health and Social Care Committee, which I chair, has worked together with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee—I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who has also spoken about this—and we know what works. The tragedy is that we could deal with the problem. Our joint Committees looked at the options and achieved a cross-party consensus; we worked alongside a citizens’ assembly, because we think it is really important to build consensus outside this House. There are some principles we should be following. I urge the Minister, in her response, to tell us when the social care Green Paper will be published and commit to ensuring that it looks at the work of our joint Select Committees and the citizens’ assembly.

We can move forward, but if we have learned anything from the Brexit process, surely it has to be that we cannot build consensus at the end of a process; we have to build it in right from the start. I hope that the Green Paper will be designed to achieve that, and that it will set out the principle of fairness in the funding of social care. One statistic that we should all be aware of is that in the next 14 years, as our demographic changes and the percentage of our population aged over 65 increases to 23%, there will be 4.4 million more citizens aged over 65 but only 1.5 million extra citizens aged under 65. It is simply not sustainable to allow all the extra cost to fall on working-age, employed adults, so we must look at how to spread it fairly across the generations and between the employed and the self-employed.

I agree with Members who have talked this afternoon about reimagining national insurance as national health and care insurance. If we are truly to move towards a system that expands not only eligibility but quality, we need to bring more funding into the total system; the funding cannot just come from local sources. I urge the Minister to set out what she feels about the measures highlighted in the joint Select Committee report, and whether the Government will commit to coming up with a solution that can deliver real change, rather than kicking the issue down the line.

The wrong lesson to learn from the last general election campaign would be, “Don’t ever set out who has to pay more.” We all need to do that now, between elections. We must be realistic with our constituents about the fact that everybody needs to pay more, and we must build their trust in the idea that the increase will be delivered fairly. The consequences of doing nothing will be that more and more of our constituents will be left in desperate conditions, without carers to look after them; more and more of our care providers will go to the wall; and there will be no increase in the quality of care delivered on the ground, because there will not be the funding to support the workforce. We have to grasp the nettle with these difficult choices.

Before I close, I want to say something about Brexit. There is no version of Brexit that will deliver anything positive for health and social care, especially if we look at the impact on the workforce. The Minister will know that in parts of the south-east and London, in particular, social care is very heavily dependent on access to a workforce from the European Union. That is also the case in my constituency. Nationally, around 7% of the social care workforce are from the EU. If we cut off

access to that workforce, not only will we miss out on an incredibly important and valued skilled workforce by making it more difficult for them to come here, but we will add costs. Many of the people who work in social care—in fact, the vast majority—will not meet the current proposed earnings thresholds that will allow them to come here easily on, for example, tier 2 visas.

We need a way to nurture our workforce and to make it easy for people to come here to work and to feel valued. I do not want to meet any more people in my constituency who work in the NHS and social care and tell me that after decades of dedicated service to this country, they no longer feel welcome.

6 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston).

Having listened to the contributions today, it seems that there is a consensus that our social care system is broken, but some Members seem to be living with their heads in the clouds. To describe our social care system as broken is an understatement: it is a national scandal of which we should be ashamed. I am certain that Members present get the same casework as I get. It is the stuff of nightmares. Social care is one of those issues that genuinely keeps me awake at night.

Behind all the statistics that we hear today, there is a heartbreaking human reality. As many others will have done, I have sat and fought back the tears as I have listened to those at my local surgeries who are exhausted from the battle to get the most basic level of support for their loved ones. We have only to read some of the reports from recent Care Quality Commission inspections to get a feel for the state of our social care system today. It is beyond broken.

One report, following an inspection in Crewe and Nantwich last year, found one person with injuries that were unaccounted for. It described another person as “extremely anxious and afraid that they would be injured”, and said that they “lay in their bed in the foetal position” and that “their feet were dirty and their hair matted.”

I will never forget visiting an older lady in a nursing home who was still haunted by her experience in a previous facility, where she had suffered the most undignified neglect—a lady left shocked and confused after decades of working and paying taxes and paying national insurance contributions.

Today, I wish to focus our attention on those who work in social care. It takes a certain kind of person to work in the care sector, and I pay tribute to them all. They experience this rotten system almost every single day of their lives, yet they carry on with compassion and professionalism, despite the poverty pay and despite feeling ignored and undervalued by the Government. These are the people we rely on to protect the dignity and independence of our relatives, friends and neighbours.

What does it say about us as a nation that our social care workforce is one of the most exploited and underpaid? I cannot even imagine how it must feel to be that type of person and to be forced to leave somebody who is under their care before they have had the time to wash them, or to help them to eat. But who cares for the carers? A care worker described how staff morale was at rock

bottom, with many care workers suffering from poor mental health and worried about their job security, relying on food banks and payday loans, too scared to take time off sick. He said he felt that care workers have no voice and no respect.

As if things were not bad enough, one group of care workers, many of whom already work for the minimum wage, face losing hundreds of pounds a month because their employer, Alternative Futures Group, has taken the decision to slash payments for sleep-in shifts. Sleep-in shifts are an integral part of our care service that the Government have a statutory obligation to provide. I have spoken many times previously about the importance of this work.

Calling them sleep-in shifts can often lead to people getting the wrong impression. One of the affected workers explained to me in an email this week:

“Sometimes you have to deal with emergency situations and take a client to hospital. You never properly sleep – you are half-awake all night – listening in case that person needs you. Often, we are up 5 or 6 times a night, taking them to the toilet or calming them down when they are agitated”.

She went on to describe how she often finished a sleep-in shift only to start another day in work, often going days without seeing her three children. For her, the cut in pay will mean losing £300 a month—the cost of her bills. She is now having to consider getting a second job, or even leaving the job that she loves. One of her colleagues whom I met recently is already working a second job. She also goes days at a time without seeing her child. Both ladies work with adults with learning difficulties and their duties include administering medication, PEG—percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy—feeding, as well as washing, dressing, helping with finances and facilitating day trips.

As well as physical support, these workers also provide emotional support for the people for whom they care. Their passion for their work shines through, but the cut to their income has been the final straw and, for the first time ever, these workers have been left with no option other than to take industrial action. I stand in solidarity with those workers—as should every Member here today. They are in no way to blame for the problems in our social care system.

I questioned AFG’s decision to cut the rate of pay for sleep-in shifts given that there has been no reduction in the payment that it receives from Cheshire East Council. Its response was somewhat alarming: it claims that the funding provided by the council has never been sufficient to cover the full costs of paying the national living wage rate for sleep-ins. The charity says that its position is that

“it wants to pay above the national minimum wage for all care hours”

but that this requires additional funding. I share AFG’s concerns about what it describes as

“the dire situation funding of care is having on hard-working care staff.”

However, Cheshire East Council assures me that it does not pay providers any less for sleep-in support than it does for waking-night support and that it believes that care providers should be paying at least the national minimum wage rate. When I recently asked what the Government were doing to make sure that local authorities have enough funding to allow providers to pay sleep-ins at the national living wage rate, the Chief Secretary to

the Treasury replied that it was currently working on this with the Department of Health and Social Care, which implies that it is not being paid.

Will the Government accept responsibility for this dispute and admit that they are not providing adequate funding? If they do not, we really need to explore why this funding is not reaching the frontline. Whatever the case, it is the overworked and underpaid care workers who are paying the price, as well as the elderly and vulnerable members of our communities who rely on this vital service.

In her summing up, I hope that the Minister will address the following points. First, what advice do the Government currently give to social care providers and commissioning authorities in the light of the current legal situation regarding payment for sleep-in shifts? Will she join me in calling on AFG to take up Unison’s offer of a meeting to continue these negotiations in the hope of resolving this ongoing dispute? Secondly, will she commit to looking into the dispute to determine whether AFG receives sufficient funding to pay its workers at the national living wage rate? Thirdly, will she acknowledge that the Government could simply pass new legislation, positively applying the national living wage rate to sleep-in shifts? That would give the sector the certainty that it needs and make sure that care workers are remunerated as so many believe they should be.

We have been repeatedly promised a social care Green Paper, which will focus on a valued workforce as one of its principles, but I have little faith that it will ever even appear. It has been delayed for the fifth time since the Government first promised to publish it before I was even elected two years ago. If it is published, I am confident that it will not contain the radical solutions that this country owes to its elderly citizens and to the most vulnerable people in our communities.

Our problems in social care are systemic and structural. The only beneficiaries of the system are the private companies that are profiting from this misery and it is they who benefit from this Government’s inaction. In previous debates, I have raised my concerns about how, without any real debate, market values have penetrated areas where they do not belong, and social care is perhaps the worst example of this. As far back as 2016, the Centre for Health and the Public Interest outlined the failings of privatised adult social care. Research commissioned by Independent Age has produced several policy options that serve as a starting point for any political discussion, and it shows just what can be done where there is a will to do so.

We need to address these failings now, with an immediate uplift in funding, while we build a sustainable model for the future. Not to do so is a political choice and a clear expression of how this Government prioritise the elderly and most vulnerable people we represent, and those whom we employ to provide care services. Those working in social care need to be listened to. They can help us to build a national care service that is based on need and not profitability—one that is centred on independent living for all and dignity in later life.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I think that there are four colleagues remaining who wish to contribute. On the assumption that the wind-ups begin no later than 6.40 pm, colleagues can do the arithmetic for themselves, but we have just under half an hour for four speeches.

6.10 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to follow a very moving speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), who outlined the severe problems faced by our social care service.

On a slightly different note, last year I had the pleasure of attending the launch of renovation works to an historic old primary school in my constituency. Derelict for several years, the school lies at the heart of the Parkhouse district of my constituency of Glasgow North East. The Wheatley Group—the inheritor of Glasgow's municipal housing stock—acquired the school for conversion to new sheltered social housing. The name Wheatley and the history of the school itself evoked a reflection on the long and proud heritage of municipal socialism in Glasgow, and what the prospects might be for that tradition to re-emerge in the future.

Parkhouse was one of the first districts to be developed for municipal housing by the Glasgow Corporation after the passing of the historic Housing Act 1924, led by Glasgow Labour MP John Wheatley, during the first Labour Government. These state subsidies for house building led directly to the creation of Glasgow's municipal housing department, and saw the large-scale building of some 57,000 new homes in Parkhouse and other districts such as Riddrie and Carntyne in my constituency during the inter-war period. Indeed, the pressure to develop suitable land for new municipal housing led to Glasgow more than doubling in size, from over 5,000 hectares to over 12,000 hectares during the 1920s and 1930s.

At that time, the gas supply, water, electricity, subway, hospitals, tramways and even the telephones were all in direct municipal ownership, and there was much talk of Glasgow as a European model for municipal socialism. Indeed, at the international conference on workers' dwelling houses in Paris in 1900, Glasgow Councillor Daniel Macaulay Stevenson, after learning that the municipal control of housing was regarded as impractical by delegates, remarked that, far from that being the case, it had been carried out to an ever greater extent for 29 years in Glasgow. He elucidated the Glasgow Corporation's extensive portfolio of services under municipal ownership, which the delegates regarded as "nothing short of rank socialism".

It is interesting to see that some sentiments do not change, even more than a century later.

The scale of that sort of intervention to address the city's social problems is scarcely imaginable today. There is simply no capacity or scope within local government to undertake the sort of mission-driven improvement that can massively improve quality of life. Today in Scotland, after two decades of devolution, we now have the most centralised system of government of any country in Europe. We have the absurdity of the Glasgow city region's wealthiest suburbs carved up into self-contained enclaves, where the residents enjoy relatively low rates of council tax, while the residents of the urban core of the city—home to the poorest communities in the region—must carry the burden of maintaining and operating all the core services and amenities enjoyed by its wealthier suburban free riders. Not only has Glasgow been stripped of its residential tax base through historical depopulation and the relatively recent gerrymandering of its suburbs; the advent of the Scottish Parliament has seen a continuing war of attrition against the power of local government.

This year, the Scottish Government are set to impose cuts on Glasgow that are unprecedented in recent times and will lead to a further decline in public services in the city. According to the Scottish Parliament's information service, the local government revenue budget was cut by 6.9%, whereas the Scottish Government's revenue budget fell by just 1.6%, between 2013 and 2018. Over the same period, Glasgow City Council's core budget has been cut by 12.8%. That is almost twice the average cut to Scotland's 32 council areas, and seven times the cuts to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government are proposing a further disproportionate cut to Glasgow of 3.6%—or £41 million—this year.

Although there is no question but that the Tories are to blame for cutting the block grant of the Government in Edinburgh by 1.6%, to multiply the percentage cut by four to 6.9% for councils—and by even more than that in Glasgow—is a deep injustice. The only conclusion we can draw is that local government, and Glasgow in particular, has been targeted disproportionately. Our city is having to absorb a cut to its budget proportionately seven times greater than the cut being absorbed by the Government in Edinburgh. That is £233 per head for each Glaswegian between 2010 and 2018.

Already 30,000 Scottish council jobs have gone, swimming pools are being closed, community health projects face non-renewal, class sizes are rising, pupil attainment is stalling, high streets are declining, community groups are losing grants, youth clubs are closing, grass is being left uncut, litter is piling up, roads and pavements are in serious disrepair, and social workers face ever-increasing case loads. In Glasgow North East, we face the potential closure of a local swimming pool, a sports centre and numerous municipal golf courses that were only spared cuts this year after a determined local campaign to save them caused such embarrassment that the council reversed its decision.

Glasgow is unfairly bearing the brunt of decisions to scale up the cuts as a share of its overall budget compared with the Scottish Government. Labour will end Tory austerity at source when the Leader of the Opposition steps into No. 10 Downing Street, but in the meantime Glasgow simply cannot take a further hit that is so disproportionate to that being taken by the Scottish Government. I am continually being contacted by spontaneous local campaigns coming into existence to fight the cuts that Glasgow is making because of the severe retrenchment it has been asked to make. We are facing the closure of entire facilities and services, and the council's withdrawal from non-statutory quality-of-life provision in my constituency, which is one of the poorest parts of this country. Indeed, last year, the SNP tried to pass the burden of cuts on to working parents by doubling childcare fees, and was only forced to retreat after a determined local campaign.

The Scottish Government need to recognise that Glasgow's settlement should be no worse than the 1.6% cut that the Scottish Government block grant has suffered since 2013. I plead with the Scottish Government and the UK Government to combine to ensure that, at a bare minimum, they rescind this negative multiplier effect.

Dr Whitford: The resource budget of the Scottish Government has been cut 7% since 2010, not 1%. The idea that they have faced only a 1% cut is nonsense.

Mr Sweeney: Perhaps the hon. Lady is not fully aware that the total managed expenditure of the Scottish Government has been cut by only 1.6%. Unlike councils, they have total discretion over that spending. Councils are heavily ring-fenced by the Scottish Government, which is why core budget cuts to councils have been much higher. That is the reality of the constraints faced by local government compared with the central Government in Edinburgh.

Unless Scotland urgently addresses the problem of over-centralised government from Edinburgh and rediscovers its radical tradition of municipal socialism, it is increasingly likely that Glasgow will fall further behind its peer cities in the UK, such as Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool, as they establish new city region governments centred around directly elected metro mayors. The constitutional debate has been preoccupied with nationalist questions over the distribution of powers between the British Parliament at Westminster and the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood; it is now incumbent on us all to break that narcissistic duopoly of Parliaments and strive to rediscover our radical tradition of municipal socialism.

We in the Labour movement are not driven by nationalist sentiment when it comes to constitutional questions about how best to structure government to serve the interests of delivering socialist policy. The atrophy of municipal government in Glasgow is an urgent crisis, which we must address boldly and with imagination. As we consider plans for a constitutional convention in the new future, the question of a municipal as well as a parliamentary route to socialism must be firmly embedded at the heart of it.

6.17 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who is a tireless and passionate campaigner for his constituency—and a member of the wonderful 2017 intake.

Areas with the greatest needs, the lowest tax base and the least other resources seem to be suffering a much greater reduction than their wealthier counterparts, and Hull is no exception. I am not the only one saying that; the National Audit Office is saying it, too. The NAO has produced powerful information showing a disproportionate impact on Hull, which is creating the need for painful decisions. The situation is compounded by reductions in the central funding on which Hull relies for 81% of its budget and which it is unable to replace through local taxation. To illustrate, a local tax increase of 1% in Hull raises only £2.90 per head, whereas a local tax increase of 1% in the City of London raises £7.08 per head. Our situation is completely different. Hull, which is reliant on central Government, receives less money than ever from central Government.

Even though statistics are important, and much of our debate focuses on statistics and the percentage loss for each local area, we are forgetting the human element. To be honest, the people at the heart of it who are being affected do not care which Government introduced a measure; they do not care whose fault it is. They do not like politicians who point fingers at each other and say, “It wasn’t us. It was you.” What these people care about is what is happening to them there and then, on the ground.

I would like to talk about a couple I met recently, and to protect their anonymity, I will refer to them as Lily and Paul. Paul came to see me at my constituency office, and he was extremely upset and quite distressed. He told me about his wife. They were quite a young couple, only in their early 50s, but his wife had developed tumours on her spine. The tumours had appeared from nowhere, and no one had any idea she was ill. It started with back ache, and she ended up in hospital, needing to have the tumours operated on.

From that moment, her husband became her carer and had to do everything for her. They went from having a fit and active life, both in work, to him looking after his wife, who was bedbound. He was practically at breaking point as he told me how they met when they were 14 years old. She was the only woman he had ever been in love with, and he still loved her, even though at that moment she was lying in bed in their house unable to leave the bedroom or get down the stairs because occupational therapists had not been round to install a handrail, and they could not get a stairlift fitted because it was the wrong kind of staircase. She had been discharged from hospital without a care plan or an adult social care package available. All she was doing was lying in their bed.

Paul brought his daughter round to look after his wife so that he could come and tell me about the problems they were facing. Unsurprisingly, he said that she was suffering problems with her mental health. I said, “Well, of course; I would suffer problems with my mental health if I was unable to leave my bed and was left there in constant pain.” She was left in pain from the operation on the tumours on her spine, and the drugs were making her drowsy and incoherent.

To make matters worse, the Department for Work and Pensions informed them that she needed to attend a healthcare assessment—a woman who was bedbound, having had operations on her spine. He was dealing with this on a day-to-day basis, while seeing the woman he had loved from the age of 14 and still deeply loved in such pain and such a desperate situation. Eventually the DWP relented, and someone came to do an assessment of her. Paul said that his wife could not answer the questions properly because the amount of opiates she was on to deal with her pain meant that she would not fully understand all the questions, but he was told by the person doing the assessment that, as her husband, he should not be answering for her and should allow her to answer the questions herself, even though she barely understood what was being said.

He came into my constituency office just yesterday to tell me that his wife has not been declared sick enough to qualify for the mobility component of the benefit. He has been left unable to work, and his wife, who he is desperately in love with, is unable to get the support she needs and is being turned down for enhanced benefits. Goodness me! How sick does someone have to be to get enhanced benefits if they are on drugs that make them incoherent and are laid in their bed, unable to move? I asked Paul, “What about you? Are you getting any respite or care?” He said, “I can’t, because what happens to her if I become ill? What happens to her if I’m not there? She doesn’t fully understand because she’s on pain medication.”

This is what people are facing. When we hear from those on the Front Benches, let us not point fingers at each other and say, “Your Government did this,” and, “Your Government did that.” Let us look at what is

[Emma Hardy]

happening to people like this right now. Let us look at the fact that life expectancy is dropping in my constituency. Tell me then that this Government's reforms have been successful and that it is not time to change. Do not give me a quote about the amount of money. Tell me about the people whose lives are being changed because they are not getting the support they need. Until I see a real difference on the ground, all the rest of it is just spin. Please, Minister, come to the Dispatch Box and tell me you have listened and that people like Paul and Lily will get the support they need and not be left to suffer any longer.

6.24 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) has summed up the importance of today's debate. The reality is that care does not come for nothing; it costs money, and it is about where this Government's priorities actually sit. We have heard the talk about millions and billions of pounds so many times, yet the very people in our society who need special care are so often overlooked.

I want to thank the staff of City of York Council for the incredible work they do for my city, as they have in very difficult times over the last four years. Decisions are often made that they do not agree with, yet they have complied with them as servants of our people, and that is against the backdrop of losing a fifth of their wages in real terms.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) highlighted how careworkers in particular are paid so poorly. Why? They are women. The fact is that this Government take it that women will not go out on strike and will not fight, but will care instead because they know how desperately people need their labour. They know how desperately people need them to visit and how, if they do not turn up that day, somebody will be worse off. That is why money is not put in: because they care and because they are women. The inequality that is now embedded so deeply in our system highlights to me how broken the funding system for local government is.

Beyond that, we know that local government itself does not get the investment, yet it is where change can really happen. We heard earlier about how Labour brought in a place-based system, looking at how to get the interconnectivity of different lines of funding. Now we see the fragmentation, the diktats from Government and the pulling apart of local communities, and I see that reflected in my local area as well. The whole system of funding is broken, and funding has not been spread out to where there is greatest need.

Returning to the issue of older people, I want to highlight this point. In this place, we talk about older people only with regard to social care and pensions, which are seen as financial burdens on the state. We do not talk about how the state can invest in these really precious lives and ensure that their rights are upheld right to the end. That is why the all-party group on ageing and older people, of which I am the chair, set up an inquiry into the human rights of older people, and the report came back saying that it is absolutely vital that there is a commission on the rights of older people.

I have written to both the Ministers sitting on the Front Bench—the Minister for Care and the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—and I have to say that the response has been woeful. We are talking about the rights, voice, opportunity and future of older people, but they are just dismissed. I believe that is why we have seen the delay in the social care Green Paper, which, let us face it, is a discussion document and is not going to change anything. The prioritisation placed on the most vulnerable people in our society is wrong, and we have got to see change.

If we are talking about wider change, there is the funding of local authorities as well, and it is a broken system. When we look at business rates—I have debated them many times in this place—we see that, as the high streets are hollowed out, the business rates return even less, so local government's dependency on business rates does not work. We have of course seen precepts, which are regressive, and the council tax, which at its concept was a stopgap for the failed poll tax system. We need to look at funding for local authorities in a very different way.

This is not just about funding, but about how funding interconnects with the social ambition of our councillors. I have to say that Labour's vision in York is very different from that of the current administration, which has just let the market move in. Profit-obsessed developers are now building luxury apartments all over our city, which, quite frankly, people in York cannot afford. We are one of the lowest-wage economies in the north: wages fell in York by £66 last year, and pay is £80 a week lower than the national average.

We are a post-industrial city and we are struggling, yet people are exploiting our city. Just two weeks ago, the council agreed plans to put up 2,000 luxury flats in the middle of our city when we have a housing crisis. Eleven people died on our streets last year, and we have families—whole families—in cramped, one-bedroom box rooms, and they are damp as well. What is happening on the ground in local authority areas is completely unacceptable. It is the responsibility of Government to wake up to the reality. I do not want to hear platitudes; I want to see action.

York is the most inequitable city outside of London; the inequality and life expectancy there show that there is failure in the system. It may work for some, but it certainly is not working for the many. Labour's vision for our city is very different. We want investment in people. We want to give them back their voice so that they can build their future. That is what we will do, should we come to power on 2 May.

People have exploited our city. The post office, Bootham Park Hospital and the barracks have been sold, but the money has not come back into our city. Those sites have been handed over to developers who, quite frankly, just want to make money; they do not want to invest in people. Our city is crying out for a change in approach. It looks shabby and dirty. Waste is not being addressed and recycling rates are falling. The issues that people care about in our communities are not being addressed.

The Labour party, however, is ambitious. We will put in place a transport commission to address air pollution, which is taking 150 lives a year in our city. We will make it a carbon-neutral city by 2030, which is more ambitious by far than this Government. We will ensure that we

invest in green spaces, because that is a more holistic approach and better for people's health. We will make those connections and join the dots.

Why do that in York? We only need look back 100 years, when Seebohm Rowntree carried out his studies of poverty in our city. We will also do that, should we get elected in May, and look at the real deprivation that exists in our city. The Rowntree family then built jobs and housing, put in education and pension systems, promoted the leisure and pleasure that people should enjoy in their everyday lives, and rebuilt York out of the slums. That is what Labour will do again, should we be given the opportunity on 2 May. We will not only analyse what has gone wrong—it is there for everyone to see—but give people the security they deserve and hope for their future so that they can join us on the journey to build a compassionate, humane city.

6.32 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Ind): It is an honour to participate in this debate and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell).

We were told last year by both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor that austerity is over. I beg to differ, because austerity is alive and well in Peterborough. Our revenue support grant is just £10 million this year, which means that it has been cut by more than 80%. Since 2010, this Government have cut £20 million of funding from my local council, which has meant a £431 loss per year for each household in the same period. That money has been taken straight from the pockets of my constituents. It could have funded 37 children's centres and 1,162 domiciliary care workers.

In addition, it is estimated that there is a nationwide shortfall of £1 billion to bridge the funding gap in children and adult social care. As people work and live for longer, that gap will continue to increase. When will this Government wake up to the fact that these cuts to our local council and social care budgets have seriously harmed their ability to function? Our councils are so starved of funding that they can only just about fulfil their statutory obligations. The cuts are having a devastating impact on Peterborough City Council's funding and the cash-strapped social care sector.

If the Government are truly serious about ending austerity, they will invest in our schools, councils and public services, and they will do it sooner rather than later. Warm words that austerity is over will not cut it. In order for my constituents to have continued access to the basic provisions that my council should be providing, this Government need to invest. We need deeds, not words.

6.34 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Today, we have heard from many hon. Members about the disastrous impact of the Government's relentless and short-sighted cuts to council budgets from Hull to Westminster North, from York to Nottinghamshire, from West Ham to Lewisham, from Birmingham to St Helens, from Sheffield to Exeter, Burnley, Hartlepool, Tyneside, Chesterfield and many others. Nowhere, as we have heard in the debate, has that disastrous impact been felt more acutely than in social care. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and for Crewe and

Nantwich (Laura Smith), whom we heard from in the past hour, on presenting such powerful stories about family carers and the role of care staff, the absolutely vital two parts of the backbone of social care.

Social care is one of the most important pillars of support for vulnerable people up and down the country. I pay tribute to all our dedicated and hard-working care staff, many of whom are in the dilemma my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) just talked about. It is sad that the cuts mean we are in a situation where care staff have to go on strike for their pay, because many of them go above and beyond in the most difficult of circumstances to make sure that older people and disabled people get the help they need. We think a lot about NHS staff, but let us face it: without our 1.4 million care staff the care system would simply collapse. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) raised the crucial fact that there are 110,000 vacant posts in the care workforce. That vacancy rate is deeply concerning, because it makes the situation for the staff who are doing the job much, much worse.

The Government should be shouting from the rafters about the value of social care, but most of the time there has instead been a wall of silence. It is only by securing this Opposition day debate today that we have been able to raise this issue. There is very little coverage of the issue elsewhere. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) talked about the vacuum around Government policy on social care, and she was right to do that. Ministers seem not to want talk about a vision for social care. That is not surprising, I guess, following the Government's litany of broken promises about reform. Let me just touch on some of them.

The Government dropped the cap on care costs, due to come into effect in 2016—we had legislated for a cap on care costs—leaving thousands of people unexpectedly having to pay for their own care. Then, at the general election in 2017 we had the so-called dementia tax, a disastrous proposal which lasted only four days before being abandoned. I have met family carers who are still desperately worried about that policy, because they think it is still around. Now, more than two years after promising a social care Green Paper, with the hope of better support for families across the country, the Government are still no nearer fixing the crisis that they have made. Let there be no doubt about it: this crisis has been made so much worse since 2010. We were told there would be a Green Paper in summer 2017 and then by the end of 2017, but it never arrived. It was then delayed till summer 2018 and then autumn 2018. Winter came and still no Green Paper. The Secretary of State told us at the start of the year that it would arrive by 1 April. It has not arrived and there is still no sign of the Green Paper. Perhaps the Minister will tell us when we are going to see it.

Now, when councils need an extra £1.5 billion to close the funding gap, the Government have offered derisory short-term funding. Last winter, the Government offered a measly £240 million for adult social for winter pressures. That would pay for only three months of home care for the older people the Secretary of State said it would help, but that is not enough. That was hardly enough for the harsh conditions of last winter, which, if you remember Mr Speaker, lasted very much more than three months. This year, councils will receive

[Barbara Keeley]

a further £410 million to be shared between older adults, working-age adults, and children's social care services. The Secretary of State is leaving councils and councillors to make the invidious choice between caring for the most at-risk children, vulnerable adults with disabilities, and our most frail and isolated older people. Throwing small, one-off pots of money at this problem every year will not deal with the crisis in the long term. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston said, it is a sticking plaster on a gaping wound.

James Cartledge: Will the hon. Lady set out her preference for how we should pay for long-term care?

Barbara Keeley: We get this every time we have a debate on social care—although we do not have many such debates—from Government Members who have no ideas whatsoever. I have just run through all the abandoned ideas and the abandoned promises that the Government have made on the Green Paper. I am really surprised that any Government Member actually has the cheek to stand up and ask Opposition Front Benchers what we would do. We laid out what we would do in 2010. We had a White Paper, not a Green Paper. We laid out all our proposals in our manifesto. We are the side with ideas and proposals on taking forward social care. This Government have no ideas and no vision, and I am amazed that an hon. Member really has the cheek to do that.

James Cartledge: It is very kind of the hon. Lady to give way. I spoke in the debate and said that we have some very difficult decisions to face. We need to be open with the public, and I said that we need to look at, for example, equity in residential property. I think that is unavoidable. Does she think we should do that?

Barbara Keeley: We have laid out our proposals and we said how we would fund them. As I say, most of what we are debating today relates to the short-term crisis. Once we got past the short-term crisis, I think the hon. Gentleman would have difficulty. There has been talk about involving the public in this. At the moment, the public are faced with the type of care that my hon. Friends have discussed and debated and with the care staff and workforce in the situation that they are in. At no point, in the middle of a crisis, would we be saying to the public, "Use the value of your property. Let's go for this type of funding or that type of funding." That is cloud cuckoo land. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle talking about that absolutely crucial example. What would he say to those people who need care? That is the question for him to answer.

Councils need sustained investment that undoes the damage of years of austerity and cuts, but the Government's choice—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman is sitting there smirking at me at the moment. The Government have made a choice to pursue ideological cuts to council budgets that have seen £7 billion lost from adult social care spending since 2010. Let us think about what that has meant: 400,000 fewer people getting publicly funded social care between 2010 and 2015; 100,000 fewer people getting taxpayer-funded social care in the last four years alone; and 90 people a day dying before they receive the public social care for which they have applied.

It is not simply the most disadvantaged who are losing out either. Many of those who are having to foot the bill for their care are being exploited by a broken care system where private care providers can act with impunity and where vindictive care homes can evict older people whose families dare to complain about their standard of care. That is a very serious matter, as we discussed in the debate, given the level of closures of care homes and the loss of care home beds we have had, as touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) also talked about being in a part of the country where it is impossible to get care. That is the position we are in. If care home owners can evict older people, that is a drastic situation. Opportunistic home care agencies are overcharging vulnerable people for care visits that are too short and endangering their health by forcing staff to work when they are sick. We heard about the care staff who are too scared to take time off sick.

I want to make clear to hon. Members the human impact of not getting the right amount of support, although those who have bothered to attend this debate—I am thinking particularly of Government Members—might have heard some examples. Simply put, it means people going without the support that they need to live with basic dignity. Not having needs met means going unwashed and undressed. It can mean waiting for hours to go to the toilet because no help is available. It can mean a person going thirsty because there is no one to pour them a glass of water and going hungry because there is no one to prepare them a proper meal. This is the experience of many thousands of older people who are going without care or who have insufficient care. I am glad that many hon. Members have talked about a care visit being the only contact that many older or vulnerable people have in the day.

The consequences of inadequate support in the community for working-age people are also horrifying. In recent months, we have seen many reports of vulnerable autistic people and people with learning disabilities left to languish for years in private in-patient units—vulnerable, detained, secluded and neglected in long-stay units. These units, many of them private, are funded by the NHS at great cost to the taxpayer because councils simply have not been given the money to move people from these units to be supported closer to home. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) both raised that issue. I have stood at this Dispatch Box before and called this a national scandal, and I make no apology for doing so again.

Back to Government promises: after Winterbourne View in 2011, the Government promised to close inappropriate units for good within three years—by 2014. It did not happen. Indeed, eight years later, there are still 2,260 people detained in hospital settings when they need not be there. The number of adults trapped in these units has fallen by only a fraction. Worse still, the number of children in these units has actually increased.

Where this Conservative Government have done nothing, Labour will act: rather than years' more cuts, we will invest £8 billion in social care; rather than 90 people a day dying waiting for care, we will provide more people with the support they need; rather than care staff being pushed to the brink, we will pay them a real living wage; and rather than more delay, we will build a national care

service that supports older and disabled people when they need it. This is our message to people across the country, young and old, desperate for care and support: a Labour Government will give you the support you need and deserve. That is why I urge Members to support our motion tonight.

6.46 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinéage): I start by recognising and paying tribute to those who care for us. It is a mark of our society how we care for the most vulnerable. Across the country, whether working in a care home, a person's own home or at a day centre or another centre, so many dedicate their lives to caring for others. I also thank hon. Members from across the House who have taken the time to debate this important issue. We have heard a great number of passionate, measured, detailed speeches, and people have spoken about a range of issues and shown in-depth knowledge of and passion for their own constituencies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) demonstrated the enormous knowledge one would expect from a former local government Minister in a wide-ranging speech that highlighted how most funding baselines take several factors into account, including deprivation. That is an incredibly important point. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, spoke passionately about the joint report that he and his Committee produced in partnership with the Health and Social Care Committee. He spoke about how it highlighted the importance of integration at a local level and the importance of housing, and he said it was important that the Government took that into consideration and came back to the House with our Green Paper. I pledge to him that we will do that.

Mr Betts: The obvious question: when will we see the Green Paper?

Caroline Dinéage: We will bring it forward as soon as possible. The hon. Gentleman's colleague, the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), made similar points about the importance of taking on board the hard work of the Select Committee, which came up with some interesting proposals for funding in particular.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Will the Minister also ensure that the Green Paper covers the vital work done by unpaid carers, who are often ignored in funding policy, particularly when it comes to funding breaks for these unpaid carers, who find it so difficult to get away?

Caroline Dinéage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to the incredible work of the army of unpaid carers out there and the immeasurable value they bring to the loved ones they look after. Not only will we cover them in the Green Paper, but we have looked at them as part of our dedicated action plan for carers, which we released last year and which we continue to work on.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Caroline Dinéage: I want to make some progress, because a number of Members have made a lot of points and I want to try to cover them, but I will come back to those who want to ask questions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) said, in the words of Bananarama, that "it's not what

you do, it's the way that you do it". She highlighted the innovative moves by her local council in East Sussex to look into delayed transfers of care and stepdown beds. She rightly paid tribute to the hard work of the NHS and local authority staff who do so much to stop people being trapped in hospital beds, which we know is no good for them in the long term.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) reminded us of the parlous financial situation that we inherited in 2010, and of all the difficult decisions that have had to be made across different councils and central Government as a result. He also gave some great examples of local councils that have achieved efficiencies through innovation, technology and sensible decisions, and spoke of the need for much more honesty and transparency as we try to find a solution to the problem of adult social care.

The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) made a thoughtful and measured speech, focusing mainly on adult social care. She spoke a lot about the workforce issue, about which I myself am particularly passionate. In February we launched an adult social care recruitment campaign called Every Day is Different. The aim is to raise the profile of the sector, and to encourage people with the right values to apply to work in this incredibly important role. The Department of Health and Social Care also funds the Skills for Care campaign to help the sector with recruitment, retention and workforce development. That includes the distribution of £12 million a year for a workforce development fund. Providers can bid for a share of the fund to help their staff to train and gain qualifications at all levels.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) spoke passionately about carers, who have already been described as the unsung heroes of our health and care system. My hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) made a number of points, but, in particular, raised problems in relation to continuing care. NHS England has launched an improvement programme to help clinical commissioning groups to address variations in the assessment and granting of eligibility.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) made a thoughtful and heartfelt contribution. He talked specifically about the challenges facing coastal communities. I empathised with that, as I represent a coastal community myself. He said that Hartlepool was a vibrant and welcoming place. He is a great ambassador for his constituency—as, indeed, is my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who tells us all that her own constituency is the No. 1 place to live in the UK, and also the No. 1 hotspot for night life. I am not sure how she knows that! She spoke about the lottery of long-term care. We will seek to address the catastrophic way in which care costs can affect some individuals in the Green Paper, when it comes forward.

Norman Lamb: The Minister has just mentioned the Green Paper. I realise that she cannot say when it will be published, but do the Government intend it to lead to reform in the current Parliament when it is published, or are we likely to have to wait until some time in the middle of the next decade before any reform actually happens?

Caroline Dinéage: I think the honest answer to that question is that there will be a bit of both. The Green Paper is a big document which covers a range of issues. It will be possible for some developments to take place immediately, but others will take longer.

Dr Wollaston: The Minister's reply suggests that the Green Paper already exists. There is a great deal of frustration about the delay. The Green Paper was supposed to follow hard on the heels of the 10-year plan, because the two were closely linked. The Secretary of State gave a pledge from the Dispatch Box that it would be published before Christmas. Will the Minister at least set out the reasons for the delay, and give some indication of when we might expect it? It is such a crucial document.

Caroline Dinéage: As the hon. Lady will know, a version of the Green Paper already exists, but that does not mean that we are resting on our laurels while we are waiting for an opportunity to publish it. We are continuing to improve it and evolve it so that when we do publish it—as soon as possible—it will be in the best possible shape.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford also spoke about dementia, and about the importance of investing in dementia care and research. We lead the world in this regard, but we know that there is more to be done if we are to achieve our aspiration of being the best place in the world in which to live with dementia by 2020.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) spoke about some of the difficulties for councils that had been addressed by “working smarter”. She also said that she thought it unfortunate that councils had had to raise council tax in order to have the money that they need. I point out to her gently that the average annual increase in council tax bills from 1997 to 2010 was 5.8% and since 2010 it has been only 2.2%—half what it was under the previous Labour Government.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) spoke about youth violence and the importance of schools, social services, voluntary sector organisations and public health bodies working together through a community-led approach to deal with it. She was absolutely right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) spoke about the challenges facing rural communities and the higher costs of delivering things such as domiciliary care. She also spoke about the importance of innovation, quality of care and being outcome-focused. She spoke glowingly about the National Centre for Rural Health and Care.

I always listen very carefully to what the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) has to say because he has done this job. He spoke about the importance of investing in prevention and said that social care must help people stay independent for longer. He admitted that this job is not quite as easy as it looks and that when he was fulfilling it, there were difficult funding decisions that had to be made. It will be no surprise to him that that continues to be the case and that nothing has changed since he left the role. It is important that he recognises that the challenges continue.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) said that innovative choices have had to be made, that there are better services that cost less in his constituency

and that the local authority has had to invest in order to save money. He did make a couple of errors, unfortunately. He mentioned that Labour councils are producing lower council tax, but everybody knows that it is actually Conservative councils that deliver better value for money, with a combination of delivering great quality services while keeping council tax lower than either Labour or the Liberal Democrats.

The hon. Members for Burnley (Julie Cooper), for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) all made passionate speeches, mainly about the impact of austerity on areas of deprivation.

The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) spoke about an innovative employment hub that has grown from the loss of the steelworks in her constituency. She spoke about the Care Academy in Cleveland, which is doing great work equipping more people for roles in adult social care. She mentioned how the challenges of caring for an ageing population are being addressed at a local level. I say to her that that is something that will have to be addressed not just at a Government level, but at a local level and a voluntary level. We all have to work together to face these challenges, which are being faced the world over.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) spoke about how important it is to have cross-party and collaborative work on this issue. We all face difficult choices. For too long, adult social care has been used as a political football. Even today, the Opposition spokeswoman talked about the dementia tax once again. That is very unhelpful language that does not help us come to a meaningful consensus or to work together.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinéage: I will in a moment.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) asked about the important issue of sleep-in shifts. The Court of Appeal judgment last summer ruled that employers are not required to pay the national minimum wage. That has now gone to the Supreme Court, the ruling of which should give clarity to both providers and employees. The Government have taken account of the costs deriving from the national minimum wage and gave an additional £2 billion of funding to local authorities in the spring Budget of 2017. We encourage employers to pay more than the minimum wage where possible, and I recently wrote to local authorities to state my view that the judgment should not be used as an opportunity to make ad hoc changes.

Barbara Keeley *rose*—

Caroline Dinéage: I am just going to make a bit of progress.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) highlighted the difficult choices we have had to make. By painting an even bleaker picture of how things have panned out north of the border, he showed just how difficult those choices have been.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) spoke movingly about her constituents, Paul and Lily. She was right to highlight the very personal cases and individual stories that every single one of us comes across in our constituency casework.

If she wants to send me more details, I am happy to raise the issue with my colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions.

The population is ageing. The number of people aged 75 and over is set to double over the next 30 years, and the number of people of working age with care needs is also growing. Some of today's speakers have painted a picture of a social care system that is broken as a result of a lack of funding, but the truth is that while money is undoubtedly tight, if we are to face the challenges of an ageing population, we need to do more than just put more money in. We need a large-scale reform of the system if we are going to face the future with confidence that we can care for and support those who most need it. In the short term, we have put in around £10 billion of additional funding, but we will be bringing forward an adult social care Green Paper that will look at the long-term funding of adult social care.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that despite the Prime Minister announcing that austerity is over, local authorities' spending power per household is on course to fall by an average of 23 per cent by 2020, and that nine of the 10 most deprived council areas in this country have seen reductions that are almost three times the average of any other council under this Government; recognises that this has resulted in social care budgets in England losing £7 billion; further notes that at the last General Election Labour committed to a fully costed plan to invest an additional £8 billion in social care over this Parliament; and calls on the Government to ensure that local authorities and social care are properly and sustainably funded.

Andrew Gwynne: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am really pleased that the practice of having Opposition day debates has resumed, although it is regrettable that the Government's practice of not voting on them seems to have resumed as well. This implies Ministers' acceptance of the motion, and that they are acknowledging unfair cuts impacting on the most deprived communities and the social care crisis. What can be done to bring Ministers to the Dispatch Box, in the terms of the motion before the House today, before the local elections so that they can set out how they are going to solve the funding crisis?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Obviously, that is not a point of order, but the point that the hon. Gentleman has made is now on the record.

Business without Debate

Ordered,

That the Higher Education (Registration Fees) (England) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 543), be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

PETITION

Revocation of Article 50

7.1 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The petition to revoke article 50 on the House of Commons website is by far and away the largest ever to be signed. More than 6 million people across the United Kingdom have signed it, including 15,112 residents of Glasgow North, which represents nearly 20% of the estimated constituent count. They are fed up with Brexit chaos. They want the process to stop, and they want their voices to be heard. However, I have one particular constituent who has never had an email address and therefore found herself unable to sign the petition in the way that so many others have done. She wants to make sure that her voice is also heard loud and clear, so as far as I am concerned, my presenting this petition will bring the total for Glasgow North to 15,113.

The petition states:

The petition of a resident of Glasgow North,

Declares that the government has repeatedly claimed that exiting the EU is "the will of the people"; and further that this claim is undermined by the 6,079,460 signatures on e-petition 241584 titled "Revoke article 50 and remain in the EU".

The petition therefore requests that the House of Commons urges the Government to revoke article 50 and remain in the EU.

And the petitioner remains, etc.

[P002450]

GKN Aerospace, Kings Norton

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

7.3 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise the case of GKN Aerospace in Kings Norton. It is a year to the day since the Business Secretary made a statement to the House to tell us that, while he would not intervene to block Melrose Industries' hostile takeover bid for GKN last year, we could all take comfort in the legally binding undertakings that the company had given him about the future. Indeed, at the time, Melrose was falling over itself to assure everyone of its commitment to manufacturing in the UK. For example, on 13 March 2018, Melrose's chief executive Simon Peckham wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, setting out particularly clearly what the company asked us to believe about its intentions. He said that the company's commitments included:

“Returning GKN to be a British manufacturing powerhouse—competitive on the global stage. Committed to innovation... Investing in skills, R&D and productivity to support the Industrial Strategy... Working with suppliers and customers to boost Britain's industrial base and the wider economy.”

On 5 April, just over a year since Mr Peckham wrote that letter, workers at the GKN Aerospace plant at Kings Norton in my constituency were told what these assurances meant for them when GKN's management announced that the plant is to be run down over the next two years and closed altogether in 2021, with the loss of over 170 jobs. The company says that the work undertaken by the factory will be transferred to “other GKN Aerospace sites or low cost areas”.

By “low cost areas” we can safely assume that the company means overseas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this breach of faith cannot go unchallenged by this House or by the Minister lest every other big business that reaps the benefits of Government contracts, Government funding and Government subsidy decides that it too can go against its word and move its work to Mexico, Morocco or elsewhere? Shareholders can enjoy the benefits while our own hard-working men and women—the hon. Gentleman is a friend and a hard-working MP—wonder how to keep their homes and feed their families.

Richard Burden: The hon. Gentleman is quite right, and I thank him for his kind words. This breach of faith needs to be challenged, and I hope that the Minister will assure us that it is not only Opposition Back Benchers who are challenging the decision and that the Government will do so as well.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Although my hon. Friend says that 170 jobs will be lost, we actually have to multiply that by two or three because of the supply chain. Such figures can be utterly misleading. I am sure that my hon. Friend will recall that national security and the whole defence industry were mentioned when this matter was first debated. Despite the assurances received by Ministers, such companies have not honoured

their agreements. There is a pattern of asset stripping with this company and others, and it is about time that the Government got tough with them. The Government also need to consider national security, because I have worked in the defence industry and know what it means.

Richard Burden: My hon. Friend is right to mention national security. It was raised last year, and I will refer to it later in my speech, because GKN Aerospace Kings Norton manufactures windscreens, windows and other transparencies for both military and civilian aircraft.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an important point, because this matter is not restricted to the defence industry. Asset stripping has a wider impact across our manufacturing base, and if this Government are serious about growing this country's industrial base and manufacturing capability, they had better get a grip on these matters and insist on statutory provision and legislation to back up the obligations on private capital to deliver in the national interest. Does he agree?

Richard Burden: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I hope that we hear some strong statements from the Minister about what the Government are going to do.

Last year, not only had Melrose sought to assure the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee of its intentions, but it provided a series of similar undertakings to Ministers. In the Business Secretary's statement to the House on 24 April, one year to the day before this debate, he declared:

“I look to the management to honour its commitments in both the spirit and the letter, and to create a strong future for GKN, its employees, its suppliers, and the industrial sectors in which it will play a major role.”—[*Official Report*, 24 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 760.]

He also said:

“Melrose has also agreed to meet my officials and me every six months to provide updates on its ownership of GKN.”—[*Official Report*, 24 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 759.]

In the light of all that, one might have expected Ministers to have told the company this month that, rather than close the Kings Norton site, they expected it to honour the spirit, as well as the letter, of the undertakings it had given. Instead, in a written answer to me on 16 April, I was informed that the Secretary of State had been told that the closure plan was the result of “an internal strategic review by GKN”

and that it was

“a commercial decision for GKN Aerospace and not in contravention of the deed of covenant agreed between BEIs and Melrose.”

If Melrose has indeed been meeting the Secretary of State's officials every six months as promised, has anything been said in those meetings about the future of the Kings Norton plant being in doubt? If so, what alternatives to closure did BEIS urge on Melrose, and what was the company's response? If not, what on earth is the point of these six-monthly reviews if they are not expected to cover an issue as important as the closure of a plant?

Of course, BEIS is not the only Department with which Melrose entered a deed of covenant last year. The Business Secretary told the House that the Ministry of Defence had received undertakings that would

“prevent the disposal of the...business, components of a business or assets without the consent of the Government”.—[*Official Report*, 24 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 759.]

The Kings Norton plant produces windscreens and windows for military as well as civilian aircraft, so can we assume that the MOD will now step in? Apparently not. A written answer from that Department on 15 April told me that, as defence work is being “moved, not stopped”, the Secretary of State for Defence would not be issuing a note of concern under the covenant.

I assume the Minister spoke to his colleagues in the MOD before this debate, so can he tell me whether GKN has made an unambiguous commitment to retain in the UK all defence-related work undertaken by the Kings Norton plant? What has GKN said about how it plans to dispose of the Kings Norton plant after closure?

No doubt the Minister will tell me about the various investments GKN has announced in its aerospace and automotive divisions at other plants in the UK, and I welcome those investments. However, the first that employees at GKN Aerospace in Kings Norton knew of the company’s plans to close their plant was when they were told on 5 April 2019. That is simply not good enough, and it is a breach of faith with what Melrose said last year.

If the company believes there is a profitability issue at Kings Norton, should not Ministers be telling it that the spirit of the undertakings given last year means that it should first discuss the situation, and the options for the future, with the trade unions representing employees before decisions are made, rather than simply informing them afterwards? When Melrose said last year that its mission is “to power” the Government’s industrial strategy to secure “the best outcomes” for employees, suppliers, customers and the wider economy, is it not reasonable to ask what assessment it has made of the impact of closing the Kings Norton plant on the local economy? My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) made that point earlier. Has BEIS asked the company that question and, if so, what has been the company’s response?

I do not believe that GKN now telling the Government it has conducted a strategic review is satisfactory. Do Ministers accept the need to press the company further? How did GKN reach this decision? What alternatives have been, or still could be, considered? What, in detail, is going to happen to the defence work carried out at Kings Norton, and how does GKN plan to dispose of the asset that is the Kings Norton plant? Finally, what impact, in practice, will closing Kings Norton have on the industrial strategy in Birmingham?

Without clear and convincing answers on those points, I ask the Minister to join me and other hon. Members in saying that Melrose and GKN should think again.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I welcome the Minister, Andrew Stephenson, on his first run out.

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to see a fellow Lancastrian in the Chair.

I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) on securing the debate. I pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend

the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), for all the work he has done to support UK business and industry, which I am sure he will continue to do for many years to come.

I represent the constituency of Pendle, which is home to several large aerospace businesses, so I fully appreciate the pride that the constituents of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield feel in working for a company like GKN, which can trace its roots back to 1759 and the birth of the industrial revolution. I also appreciate the impact of the loss of jobs on an area, with aerospace jobs typically paying around 43% above the national average. I greatly sympathise with the staff who will be affected by the company’s decision to close the Kings Norton site by 2021. I say that as someone whose family has a long-standing association with the aerospace sector, with three generations of my family working at Chadderton and Woodford for Avro, the firm that produced the legendary Lancaster and Vulcan aircraft. I know the pride that my family members felt in working for such a great British company, and even years after his retirement, my uncle Tom worked on projects celebrating the company’s achievements. I know that employees of GKN share a similar sense of pride in working for such a great British company, and I commend the hon. Gentleman’s dedication and passionate advocacy on behalf of his constituents.

I turn to the points raised by the hon. Gentleman. I can confirm that Melrose informed both my Department and the Ministry of Defence of the proposals to close the site on 1 April. Since then, there have been ongoing discussions between GKN and the Government on how best to support workers. He asked whether any alternatives to closing the site had been discussed. I am sure he will appreciate that this was a commercial decision for the company, but in our conversations GKN has said that it is at an early stage in the process. It has confirmed that it will do all it can to support the 172 affected employees, including providing help in seeking alternative employment both within and outside GKN.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman cannot intervene from the Front Bench.

Andrew Stephenson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As they did during the merger of GKN and Melrose, the Government continue to act to ensure that mergers result in the best outcomes for the United Kingdom. Our merger regime is a key part of the UK’s dynamic economy. Mergers and takeovers can bring great benefits to consumers and the economy. The UK has the third highest foreign direct investment stock in the world, behind the US and China. That investment means jobs in growing sectors and more opportunities to develop our skills base, and it helps companies to deliver products and services at competitive prices.

Richard Burden: It was remiss of me earlier not to welcome the Minister to his new position on the Front Bench. Can I ask him to address the question of alternatives? Frankly, saying that employees will be supported to find other jobs is not the same as asking the company whether it has looked at alternatives to closure. Has that question been asked, and what was the

[Richard Burden]

result? Is he not rather worried that nothing was apparently said about any of this in the Department's last six-monthly review with Melrose?

Andrew Stephenson: The company has emphasised to us that it is at a very early stage in the process. It has not started formal consultation with workers, but it thought it was appropriate to set out its long-term vision for the site. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and others who meet the company will discuss alternatives to the site, and I hope that we can work together to support the 172 workers who are directly affected and those in the supply chain who will also be affected.

I fully appreciate the hon. Gentleman's opposition to the takeover, which he set out today and in a debate in Westminster Hall on 15 March last year. I also understand the concerns that have been raised this evening by the hon. Members for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). However, I emphasise that mergers are an important part of our economy, and they can bring real benefits to consumers and the economy as a whole by attracting investment and promoting growth and innovation.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister is making a fair point about the potential for mergers and takeovers to be positive. He also mentioned foreign direct investment, but does he recognise that there are two types of foreign direct investment—developmental and dependent—and that the bulk of the FDI activity in the UK is dependent? It involves purchasing existing UK-owned assets and does not add to the overall capital stock of the economy or grow the economy in a sustainable way. Does the Minister recognise that that is a big flaw in the Government's industrial policy? If he recognises that, perhaps he will start to deal with it.

Andrew Stephenson: No, I think foreign direct investment is a power for good in our economy, and we should work to attract more investment into the economy. Some of our best firms have grown through mergers and acquisitions, and we have seen huge investments in different sectors with the help of foreign direct investment. It is worth saying at this point that GKN has grown through mergers and takeovers, both here and abroad. I think the firm actually bought the site from Pilkington in 2003.

The UK's merger regime is highly regarded around the world because of how it is designed. It is based on transparent rules that are administered consistently by expert bodies. It recognises that decisions are primarily a matter for the shareholders and restricts the role of Ministers to transactions that raise public interest concerns. As a result, the regime offers clarity for businesses and maintains investor confidence. An example of that is the independent Takeover Panel, which governs the takeover code. The code provides a robust framework to ensure that takeovers of listed companies are conducted in an orderly manner, with fair treatment of all shareholders.

On 12 January 2018, GKN announced that Melrose had made a takeover approach and the Secretary of State spoke to both parties to understand their intentions. The Government's priority was to ensure that the national security concerns raised by the transaction were addressed.

The Government completed a thorough and detailed assessment and concluded that they should not intervene under the Enterprise Act 2002.

Melrose voluntarily agreed post-offer undertakings with the Takeover Panel. As a result, for a period of five years, Melrose committed to sustain GKN's current level of expensed research and development at 2.2% of sales; maintain a UK stock exchange listing; remain headquartered in the UK and ensure that the majority of directors are UK resident; and guarantee that both the aerospace and Driveline divisions retain the rights to the GKN name. In addition, Melrose agreed to sign a deed in favour of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that commits the company not to sell the core aerospace business before 1 April 2023 without the Secretary of State's consent.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I welcome the Minister to the Front Bench—I should have said that earlier. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), he indicated that he has had discussions with the Ministry of Defence about the current situation. What was the MOD's view?

Andrew Stephenson: The MOD shares my Department's view that these job losses and this closure are highly regrettable but do not contravene the terms of the deed and the undertakings made during the takeover. Melrose agreed a deed with the MOD that includes clear obligations and commitments to maintain capacity and to support certain military goods, and requires that the Secretary of State for Defence be notified if Melrose plans to transfer production outside the UK. Melrose also made commitments to invest in skills and innovation, support sector deals, and support the supply chain during its ownership of the business.

Since the transaction completed, the Government have been monitoring Melrose's compliance with the terms of the deal. My officials had a meeting with the company in October 2018 and will meet it again next month. Furthermore, on 1 April Melrose publicly reported that it is in compliance with the post-offer undertakings as required by the Takeover Panel. We are currently content that Melrose is compliant with the commitments that it made to the Government. Although GKN Aerospace's decision is a huge disappointment for both the Government and the 172 staff members who will be affected, it does not contravene the commitments that were made at the time of the takeover.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield asked whether I had spoken to my colleagues in the Ministry of Defence; I have spoken to the Defence Procurement Minister, and he confirmed that they are content that Melrose has complied with its requirement under the deed with the MOD.

Prior to the Melrose bid, GKN had itself planned to restructure the business, which could have resulted in job losses, and intended to sell the entire automotive division to the US company Dana, which likewise might have decided to close UK manufacturing sites. The Secretary of State spoke to GKN Aerospace's chief executive officer, Hans Büthker, and he informed us that the announcement does not in any way reflect a reduction in growth by the company. In fact, he said it is quite the opposite: the decision is the result of an internal strategic review by GKN to invest in high-value technology-driven production. That same review proposes to invest more in other UK sites.

I understand that a meeting has now been arranged between the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield, the Secretary of State and the CEO of GKN Aerospace for further discussions on the matter, including on how we can best support his constituents who work at the site. I hope that will be an opportunity to discuss and explore alternatives to the site, and that that is something the hon. Gentleman can take forward from this debate.

As I mentioned earlier, GKN has confirmed that it will be doing all that it can to support the affected employees. We will continue to work closely with the company, the unions, the local enterprise partnership, the Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority, Andy Street, and councils to help with this effort and ensure that each and every worker is fully supported in finding new work.

Aerospace is one of our most rapidly expanding sectors and skilled and experienced employees are in strong demand. The UK aerospace sector is a great success story, and we punch well above our weight on the world stage. We are a world leader in the design, manufacture and maintenance of some of the most complex and high-value components of an aircraft, including the wings, engines, aerostructures and advanced systems. Our industry turns over £39 billion a year and the vast majority of what we make in the UK is exported globally.

Around half of the world's modern passenger aircraft have wings designed and built here in the UK, and GKN Aerospace-manufactured products are on more than 100,000 flights a day. The hon. Gentleman asked what impact the closing of the Kings Norton site will have on the industrial strategy in Birmingham. Yesterday, I attended a meeting alongside five of my ministerial colleagues to discuss the midlands engine and the progress of our west midlands local industrial strategy. This will set out an ambitious long-term vision for the west midlands economy to increase productivity, drive economic growth, and support manufacturing and technology in both Birmingham and the wider region.

The midlands has long been renowned as a hub for manufacturing, and it is not short of opportunities for advanced engineering jobs. More than a third of the UK's automotive sector employment is in the midlands, and the region boasts many globally recognised companies, including Jaguar Land Rover, JCB and Rolls-Royce. More widely, the midlands is also home to the Manufacturing Technology Centre in Coventry, which operates some of the most advanced manufacturing equipment in the world.

The past year has seen the largest GKN Aerospace UK technology investment since 2012. This includes the announcement of a £32 million UK Global Technology Centre in Bristol and the large investments made to support its additive manufacturing capabilities in the UK—both have been supported by the Government through co-funded research and development grants. This co-funded investment will support GKN's growth in the UK and will help safeguard and create high-value jobs in the company and its supply chain.

Hon. Members will be pleased to hear that GKN has also confirmed to us that there will be further investment at some of its other UK sites, including those in Luton and Portsmouth, which will soon become technology centres of excellence. This comes on top of GKN's recent announcement of £300 million in new investment to ramp up its activities in the fast-growing market for electric vehicles, something that I am sure the hon. Gentleman, as chairman of the all-party motor group, will welcome.

I can assure hon. Members that the Government will continue to support those affected by this site closure in the years ahead. Finally, I thank the hon. Gentleman again for giving the House the opportunity to debate this important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Thursday 25 April 2019

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Free Trade Agreements: NHS/Public Services

1. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps he has taken to ensure that the NHS and other public services are excluded from future trade agreements. [910509]

7. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): If he will ensure that future free trade agreements do not (a) lower standards in and (b) lead to the privatisation of the NHS. [910516]

9. **Mr Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): If he will ensure that future free trade agreements do not (a) lower standards in and (b) lead to the privatisation of the NHS. [910518]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): As we leave the European Union, the Government will ensure that all future trade agreements continue to protect the UK's right to regulate public services, including the NHS. I have been clear on a number of occasions that more trade should not come at the expense of the high levels of quality and protection enjoyed in the UK.

Diana Johnson: I am pleased that the Secretary of State has made those comments, and I am sure we can all agree that, whatever happens with Brexit, our country must not be held to ransom by multinational corporate interests over the future of the NHS and other public services, so can the Secretary of State give a watertight guarantee that we will not see any trade deals that would drive up the costs of medicines and allow foreign firms to sue the UK over improvements in public health and standards in healthcare generally?

Dr Fox: As I have made clear in questions and in debate in this House, if we look at trade agreements that we have already entered into—for example, in chapter 9 of the EU-Canada comprehensive economic and trade agreement, the cross-border trade and services chapter, article 9.2 makes it very clear we see that the Government retain the right to regulate in public services. Any changes in the NHS should be a matter for domestic policy debate in the United Kingdom, and not anywhere else.

Mark Menzies: The UK is a world leader in healthcare provision, founded on the core values of the NHS. What steps is the Department taking to promote British expertise in this sector and sell those skills abroad?

Dr Fox: There is not only enormous interest but enormous demand for UK expertise in healthcare, and we are committed to sharing that expertise and knowledge with the rest of the world. Research commissioned by Healthcare UK recently identified £3 billion to £7 billion of potential contracts for UK health organisations annually over the next 10 years. That is a lot of jobs.

Mr Speaker: Mr Philip Dunne—not here. Where is the fella? I hope he is not indisposed. We will have to proceed.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Free trade agreements are, of course, needed, and the EU has some very good ones, which is why the United Kingdom Government are copying them. But trading on World Trade Organisation terms is very expensive. What is the Secretary of State doing to dispel the notion that is abroad, particularly in his own party, that leaving the EU and trading on WTO terms is a good idea? If it was, every country would be walking out of their trade blocs and every country would be ripping up trade agreements. It is a very silly and very dangerous idea, and I hope he is doing his best to combat it.

Dr Fox: I am not quite sure how that relates to the question on healthcare, but it is an important point that the WTO rules provide a baseline, and the way in which countries get preferential treatment beyond that baseline is very often through a free trade agreement. That is why we want to see free trade agreements beyond what we have today.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I welcome the assurances that the Secretary of State has given to the House here today, but can he confirm that the principal protections for public services related to the comprehensive economic and trade agreement are in fact to be found in the joint interpretative instrument, which does not have the same legal force as the treaty? Crucially, it cannot alter or override it. If we are to have confidence in the protections for our public services and the NHS in future trade agreements, these must be written into the text of the treaties. Does he agree?

Dr Fox: However we get the assurances, that is what we need to do. In CETA, for example, they are contained in chapters 9 and 28, as well as annexe 2 and the additional national reservation in annexe 2. It is up to this House how we carry out public policy. For example, in the four years from 2006, Labour outsourced 0.5% of the NHS budget to the private sector each year, which of course fell to only half that level under the coalition Government. If Labour wants to increase to its previous levels of outsourcing, it should be able to do so under a policy protection given under the treaties.

Service Businesses: Overseas Markets

2. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to enable service businesses to access overseas markets; and if he will make a statement. [910510]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The Government support UK services businesses to access foreign markets in a number of ways, including through trade promotion and facilitation. For example, in March 2019, the DIT took a delegation of eight leading UK FinTech companies to exhibit at Money 20/20 in Singapore. The DIT also works with partners overseas to remove access barriers, opening up new opportunities for UK businesses.

Michael Fabricant: My hon. Friend will know that in this rather complex world environment, there is a confusion at times under WTO rules between goods and services. Once we leave the EU, get a clean break and regain our place at the WTO table, will he make it a priority to make clearer definitions of what are goods and what are services?

George Hollingbery: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is right; there are a great many complexities at the WTO. In fact, the world is sliding inexorably towards a future of increased protectionism without changes being agreed at the WTO to address all problems and to cope with new forms of trade that simply did not exist even 10 years ago and that create the confusion he identifies. As a newly independent voice, the UK will be a champion for change, openness and co-operation, because believe me, Mr Speaker, a failure to deal with the problems the WTO faces is not an outcome that anybody should want to contemplate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: In congratulating the hon. Member for Huddersfield upon the magnificence of his tie, I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Can all those on the Government Front Bench tell me what I should say to my service and manufacturing industries that export overseas? For years, they have been frustrated that the Chinese are stealing their patents and intellectual property, but now this Government are going to open not only the back door but the front door to the Chinese to take their secrets and undercut them.

George Hollingbery: In the past week, the Chinese have agreed a joint communiqué with the EU about the forced transfer of intellectual property, which gives us some comfort. We work extensively with the Chinese Government through joint trade reviews to examine various areas of the economy, particularly in services, where we can address this. I believe that progress is being made on this front, but I go back to the point I made to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant): this is a complex area. WTO rules make this very difficult to address, and we need to change it.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Three quarters of our economy is in services, yet over 90% of service firms export nothing. What more can be done to change this underlying culture and systemic issue, so that the majority of service firms export?

George Hollingbery: As I mentioned in answer to the previous question, we are conducting a number of joint trade reviews with India, China and Brazil—some of

the largest economies in the world—to ensure that we address some of these access barriers; to ensure that, for example, Chinese-language contracts are translated into an official English version; to ensure that service providers understand what the rules and regulations are; and to ensure that qualifications are matched across the piece. There is a great deal we can do and more that we will do.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I welcome what the Minister said about trying to open up overseas access to UK service companies. However, is it not hugely disappointing that the continuity agreements with Norway and Switzerland exclude trade in services? Is it not the case that if, post Brexit, we revert to WTO rules trade with the EU, we would see a massive 26% fall in global service trade, with just as bad a fall in the UK's service trade even if we get that free trade agreement?

George Hollingbery: As we approach the negotiations with the EU on the future economic partnership, services will play a large part in that. We have signed mutual recognition agreements with Australia and New Zealand, and as for the Norway and Switzerland deals, we should never forget that 35% of pretty much all the goods contracts entered into by the UK is contained within services value. This is not just a matter of pure services, but of goods as well.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Service exporters depend on an international workforce, but arbitrary immigration targets limit their ability to recruit the staff they need. Growing our market share in services is essential to the future success of our economy, so if this Government truly have a global strategy, why are businesses that want to export being denied access to a global pool of talent?

George Hollingbery: On the whole, the services businesses that are exporting are doing so by establishing overseas, and therefore recruitment in the UK does not particularly concern them, as they are employing people in foreign countries. That said, we know there is an issue with provision of skilled labour in the UK. The immigration Bill, when it comes forward, will provide reassurance on the ability to recruit people with certain skill levels, and I look forward to seeing that.

Free Trade Agreements: Regions and Devolved Administrations

3. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the (a) regions and (b) devolved Administrations of the UK contribute to the formulation of new free trade agreements. [910511]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): We are committed to ensuring a meaningful role for the regions and devolved Administrations in the development of our trade policy. The DIT has been consulting widely on its approach to potential FTAs with regional representatives from local government and local enterprise partnerships. I can further confirm that we are putting in place a new ministerial forum with the devolved Administrations to cover international trade, as well as continuing to discuss wider future working arrangements on trade policy.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for that answer. Businesses in Redditch such as Mettis Aerospace, Bee Lighting and Thorlux Lighting are at the heart of global manufacturing and are leading-edge businesses. Will the Minister confirm that he is working closely with representatives of west midlands manufacturing industry to ensure that their interests are represented and our local economy can benefit from future trade agreements?

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): And with the Mayor.

Rachel Maclean: Indeed.

George Hollingbery: As my hon. Friend will know, my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) is very keen on our keeping up contact with the Mayor of the West Midlands combined authority. We of course do so, and create contacts with businesses that way. The strategic trade advisory group, which will be helping us with FTAs, includes representation from regional business. We will always be there to consult with local business, and I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) to contact the local DIT business office in Birmingham in relation to any businesses in Redditch that need its help.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the devolved Administrations must be fully involved in developing both the negotiation mandate and the negotiations themselves when the international trade negotiations have an impact on devolved competencies?

George Hollingbery: I have visited the devolved Administrations several times and I talk with the Ministers on a regular basis. I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that the devolved Administrations have a key part to play as we go forward and negotiate our free trade agreements. We are currently in negotiation with the DAs on putting together what is known as a concordat on how they will be implemented. The progress on that, to be quite frank with the House, has been disappointingly slow. From our end, we have not reached an agreed policy position, but we will do so shortly, and I am keen that the devolved Administrations are properly involved.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): If all these trade agreements are going to be so glorious, irresistible and beneficial to the economy, why not simply give the devolved Administrations the power to express their consent through legislation for each of them?

George Hollingbery: The matter of trade policy is a reserved power.

EU Customs Union

4. **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the implications for the responsibilities of his Department of including UK membership of the EU customs union in the EU-UK political declaration. [910512]

8. **Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the UK's continuing membership of the EU customs union. [910517]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Government's intention, as provided for in the political declaration, is to secure a tariff-free trading relationship with our European partners, alongside an ambitious independent trade policy with the rest of the world. A customs union would prevent the UK from varying its tariffs and could leave the UK subject, without representation, to the policy of an entity over which MPs had no democratic control.

Mr Hollobone: If we were to be part of the EU customs union after Brexit, the United Kingdom, as the world's fifth biggest economy, could kiss goodbye to any realistic chance of an independent trade policy. For this very good reason, being a member of the customs union was ruled out in the last Conservative party manifesto. Were this to become Government policy, would not the Secretary of State and his entire ministerial team be honour bound to resign?

Dr Fox: It is very clear that we do not want to see a customs union being put in place for one of the reasons that my hon. Friend has already given, which is that, with us as a third country, the EU would be able to negotiate access to the UK market—the world's fifth biggest market—without any due consideration of the impact on the United Kingdom. We would find ourselves in a totally new trading position in that access to our market would be traded for us.

Martin Vickers: One of the principal benefits of Brexit is of course the ability to set our own trade policies, and many businesses in my constituency—it includes Immingham, the largest port in the country—want to take advantage of the freedoms that will be forthcoming. What additional support will the Secretary of State's Department offer those businesses?

Dr Fox: I know that my hon. Friend has taken a very close interest in free ports. We are close to finalising a report on their potential benefits, and he will be one of the first with whom I will share that information.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Some 9,000 people work in the Welsh steel industry, so can I ask the Secretary of State to think again, and support a permanent customs union and commit to a common external tariff on steel imports to support steel jobs in south Wales?

Dr Fox: No, I will not commit to that. I have set out the reasons why I believe the application of a common external tariff will be limiting on the UK's ability to carry out an independent trade policy. What I would say is that we already have the Trade Remedies Authority up and running, and that is the best way to deal with any disputes over steel through WTO rules.¹

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State accept that even outside the European Union, some other countries will seek to restrict their trade? For instance, has not the United States said about its negotiating objectives that it will seek to restrict the trading ability of any country that seeks to trade with China?

1. [Official Report, 30 April 2019, Vol. 659, c. 2MC.]

Dr Fox: The United States is perfectly entitled to set out trade objectives, as are we. We believe that trade is best operated through the rules-based international system based on the WTO. Countries can have their own opinions, but that is still the safest, best and most predictable way to carry out global trade.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): We know the benefit of a permanent customs union, particularly for the integrated supply chains on which so much of our manufacturing success is based. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the net economic benefit of an independent trade policy in the short, medium and long term?

Dr Fox: We believe it is possible to get the benefits of a customs union—no tariffs, no quotas and no rules of origin checks—through the mechanism set out in the Government's proposal on our future relationship with the European Union. The ability to access growing markets will depend on our ability to create trade agreements with those markets. A report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development suggested that by 2030 the Asian proportion of trade will be above 50% for the first time since the 19th century, and we must be in a position to take advantage of that.

Intellectual Property Rights

5. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps the Government are taking to protect intellectual property rights in international trade agreements. [910514]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The UK's intellectual property regime is consistently rated as one of the best in the world. The Government are reviewing their future trade policy as we leave the EU and ensuring that existing trade arrangements with global partners—including provisions on intellectual property—continue uninterrupted on the day the UK leaves the EU.

Mr Carmichael: The Minister will no doubt be aware that tomorrow is World Intellectual Property Day, and this year the theme is sport and intellectual property. A number of United Kingdom-based companies have had their intellectual property stolen by beoutQ, a Saudi Arabian-based pirate broadcaster, including—I know this will interest you, Mr Speaker—last Monday's Watford against Arsenal match. What steps are we taking to protect the intellectual property rights of UK businesses and sports interests, and will we use our trade policy to hold to account countries such as Saudi Arabia that are allowing the theft of our country's intellectual property in that way?

George Hollingbery: I am not familiar with the case raised by the right hon. Gentleman, but if would like to drop me a line, I would be happy to look into it more carefully. We will continue to make representations to Saudi Arabia on that point. The UK intellectual property regime is respected around the world, and our local, European and international commitments produce one of the tightest and most respected regulatory regimes for IP worldwide. We believe that is the right system, and we will insist that it is honoured by others, particularly if we are to do trade deals with them.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Minister is right to encourage small and medium-sized businesses to do more trade internationally, but those businesses are the most vulnerable to the risk of intellectual property theft. What assurances and support can the Minister give companies such as those in the digital games sector in my constituency, to encourage them to do more abroad?

George Hollingbery: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a moment ago. We have one of the most robust and respected regimes for IP protection internationally. A specialist group sits in the Department for International Trade and advises on IP matters, and that is very important to this country. We recognise the extent of exports that are driven by games, TV, sports and so on, and that is hugely important to us. SMEs should get in contact with local DIT offices. We can always help and would be delighted to do so.

GREAT Campaign

6. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What his priorities are for the GREAT campaign in 2019-20. [910515]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): GREAT is the Government's most ambitious ever international marketing campaign. [Interruption.] It encourages the world to visit, study and do business in the UK. While Labour Members never lose an opportunity to talk this country down—as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has just done there—we use GREAT to sell Britain abroad. If the chuntering from the potential future Speaker could stop for one second, I will say that GREAT works across 144 countries, and for trade and investment in 2019-20, its priorities are the USA, Germany, China, Japan, Australia, India, Canada, France, Italy and Spain.

Vicky Ford: Britain's universities are among our greatest organisations. Some are household names across the world, but some, like Anglia Ruskin University, which is based in Chelmsford as well as Cambridge, are less well known. How is the GREAT campaign supporting our education sector?

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I was at the all-party university group yesterday, meeting vice-chancellors and others, to discuss this issue. Just last month, we launched our new international education strategy. As part of that, we are encouraging bids to the GREAT challenge fund to showcase to even more countries the fantastic education offer this country has.

Topical Questions

T1. [910524] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): My Department is responsible for foreign and outward direct investment, establishing an independent trade policy and export promotion. I can announce to the

House that UK Export Finance will support an Airbus Defence and Space UK contract worth nearly \$500 million to manufacture and deliver two satellites and a ground station for Türksat, Turkey's communications satellite operator.

May I also, with your indulgence Mr Speaker, thank two civil servants who are leaving my Department? My principal private secretary, Oliver Christian, has been an outstanding civil servant and I congratulate him on his promotion. I also thank Amy Tinley, my outgoing special adviser, who has been a force of nature in my Department and will be widely missed across the whole of the civil service.

Gavin Newlands: I congratulate the civil servants on getting out of Dodge while they can.

Scottish Enterprise told the Scottish Affairs Committee that the success of Scotland's financial industry was based on accessing and servicing all customers in the EU, which it does currently under the free trade non-tariff EU passport system. Does that not highlight once again the vital importance of freedom of movement to Scotland, and that the Secretary of State's Government simply do not care about Scottish interests or Scotland's vote to remain?

Dr Fox: I will ignore the hon. Gentleman's lack of grace in his first comment.

What that shows is the importance to Scotland of services and of access to the single market in the United Kingdom. Financial services are one of the country's greatest and strongest exports, and Scotland benefits hugely from being part of the United Kingdom's infrastructure.

T2. [910525] **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): I congratulate the Government on the GREAT campaign but, in this week of St George's Day, as we celebrate all things English, will the Secretary of State confirm that we are going to promote not only everything British but the component parts of the United Kingdom, including England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and indeed our cherished Crown dependencies and overseas territories?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend, in his usual way, makes an excellent point. It is not just the fact that we have those very important constituent parts of the United Kingdom to celebrate—we also celebrate our commonality and our unity as expressed through the Union.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The world was shocked by the two crashes of Boeing 737 Max 8s that saw the tragic loss of 346 lives. That is, of course, a matter for the European Aviation Safety Agency to investigate, but it is for the Secretary of State to investigate whether the export capacity of Airbus was unfairly affected by Boeing's failure to be transparent about the pitch instability of the aircraft, or to provide specific safety training on the MCAS system, which was supposed to counter that instability. He will know that in one 12-month period the concealment of those issues helped Boeing to increase its sales against the Airbus A320neo aircraft by 768 planes, while Airbus sales dropped by 748 in the same period. What support, if any, does his Department currently provide to Boeing? Does he consider that its ethical failure has had an adverse impact on Airbus's sales? What discussions has he had about

Boeing with the Directorate-General for Competition and the Directorate-General for Trade in the European Union to protect Airbus's export capacity from unfair and potentially illegal practices by its competitors?

Dr Fox: Let me associate myself immediately with the hon. Gentleman's sentiments about the loss of lives as a result of the tragic crashes of the 737 Max aircraft. Safety issues are, of course, the responsibility of the Department for Transport but, in the context of international competition, as he is well aware, there have been two recent cases at the World Trade Organisation relating to Washington's state subsidies for Boeing and European subsidies for Airbus. As far as I am concerned, the issues relating to Airbus have been solved. I think that we would all benefit from a clear set of international rules on aircraft subsidy so that we could be assured that there is a genuine international level playing field, not least because of the rise of the Chinese aircraft industry and its entry into the market.

T6. [910530] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): This afternoon the Confederation of Indian Industry will host a major conference to allow the regions of the United Kingdom to pitch to the states of India for future international trade. What action is my hon. Friend taking to encourage the regions to pitch for business in India?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): According to an EY report, foreign direct investment has tended to move out of London into other parts of the United Kingdom, and there has been an increase in manufacturing activity. We are seeking to expand exports from all parts of the country, not least to India, and I am delighted to say that exports to India were up by nearly 20% in 2018. Only last night I attended the Grant Thornton tracker event with Mr Banerjee, the director general of the Confederation of Indian Industry, who is a great friend to this country and to our businesses up and down the land.

T3. [910527] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Because of the shambles over Brexit, UK manufacturing currently has the highest-ever level of stockpiling in the G7. The latest survey conducted by the North East chamber of commerce shows low levels of cash and, as a consequence, a sharp downturn in export activity. Cash is king: it is the lifeblood of business. Will the Secretary of State speak to his colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury and, as a matter of urgency, provide financial support for UK manufacturers to deal with this Brexit chaos?

Dr Fox: The entire premise of that question is wrong. There has not been a depression in export activity. In fact, in the first quarter of this year, exports rose by 3.1%, which was an acceleration of the trend in the fourth quarter of 2018.

T7. [910531] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Britain is also great at green tech, and a leader in areas such as offshore wind technology. What opportunities are being exploited for us to export our expertise in clean technology to other parts of the world?

Dr Fox: It is important that we take climate issues seriously. Whether or not individuals accept the current scientific consensus on the causes of climate change, it is sensible for everyone to use finite resources in a responsible way. The United Kingdom was the first country to establish legally binding emission targets, through the Climate Change Act 2008, and we have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 country. We are leaders in clean energy production, and it is estimated that \$11.5 trillion is likely to be invested globally in clean energy between now and 2050. That represents an enormous opportunity and the potential for more jobs in the United Kingdom, which, as I have said, is already a global leader in terms of both practice and exports.

T4. [910528] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): May I ask the Secretary of State to welcome Anzac day, and our long-standing friendship with Australia and New Zealand? May I also ask whether he recognises what every major economy understands—that in order to export, firms need a strong domestic market, including public sector contracts? Rather than believing that we are the only ones in step and lecturing other countries about changing their ways, should we not face reality? Will the Secretary of State urge his Cabinet colleagues to put British firms and British workers first and, in public sector contracts, to put Britain first?

Dr Fox: There is also the small matter of putting British taxpayers first, and ensuring that they are getting value for money from any contracts that we award. However, I entirely agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said about Anzac day. In fact, may I take the opportunity to invite colleagues to join me and others at the wreath-laying ceremony that will take place at the Cenotaph at 10.30 this morning, and the service at Westminster Abbey that will follow it?

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments earlier on trade agreements and the NHS. As a former clinician, can he confirm categorically that future trade agreements will not impact adversely on the values, standards or funding model of the NHS?

Dr Fox: As I said, it is very important that NHS policy and management are decided by British political debate, not from outside. We have had considerable success in utilising the private sector to augment the NHS. As Andy Burnham said, the previous Labour Government worked with the private sector to bring down NHS waiting lists, and they came right down. I would hope that any future Labour Government would have exactly the same freedoms to use the same policies.

T5. [910529] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): Donald Trump is an "America first" US President, so does that mean that in any future trade deals with the US we will be "Britain second", to our disadvantage?

Dr Fox: Obviously not.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Is there any opportunity to further promote UK steel exports through the GREAT campaign in the year ahead, not least because it is the best steel in the world?

Graham Stuart: We will take every opportunity to support UK steel exports, and of course exports in general, which is why we produced our export strategy last year. With the help of Members such as my hon. Friend, we will champion local businesses and ensure that that message goes right around the world.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Canadian model offers a useful example of how the devolved Administrations should be involved in trade policy formulation. Does the Secretary of State agree that a substantive role in the strategic trade advisory group is essential for the meaningful involvement of the Welsh Government in UK trade policy?

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The strategic trade advisory group is there to provide a broad societal view of what should be achieved in free trade agreements. We are of course talking in depth with the Welsh Government about their views on what we ought and ought not to be doing on trade policy, the industries we should be championing and how. I do not think that the strategic trade advisory group is the right place for that engagement, but there is of course a Welsh business represented on the group.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is vital for us to encourage low-income countries to participate fairly in world trade, and for that they need inward investment. Will the Minister kindly advise us on what the UK is doing to promote investment into low-income countries so that they can participate fairly and reasonably in world trade, with world-class goods and services?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for championing lower-income countries around the world. We have made outward direct investment a priority. We are working with the Department for International Development to help developing countries to attract FDI. The Prime Minister has tasked us with making the UK Africa's biggest G7 investor by 2022. Through our own investment promotion programme, DFID's Invest Africa programme, and the Africa investment summit, which I am organising with DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, we aim to drive mutual prosperity, in Africa and beyond.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Universal Credit: Joint Claimants

1. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential merits of splitting universal credit payments between partners in joint claimant households. [910532]

5. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential merits of splitting universal credit payments between partners in joint claimant households. [910536]

9. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential merits of splitting universal credit payments between partners in joint claimant households. [910540]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): We believe that most couples can and want to manage their finances jointly, without state intervention. However, we recognise that there are circumstances in which split payments are appropriate and we will always put that in place when requested.

Chris Law: We understand that the UK Government are carrying out a formal impact assessment of the options put forward by the Scottish Government on delivering split payments, but has the Minister made representations to the Department for Work and Pensions outlining how split payments could help to protect victims of domestic violence?

Guy Opperman: We are working closely with the Scottish Government to establish the practicalities and nuts and bolts of their proposed pilot. We recognise that domestic abuse, including economic abuse, is a horrific crime that can affect anybody, and we are working across parties and across Government to ensure that it is addressed.

Gavin Newlands: Does the Minister agree that the options put forward by the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People are sensible and deliverable, with the DWP's assistance, and will he congratulate the Scottish Government on taking forward this fantastic work to make universal credit fairer?

Guy Opperman: That is not within my specific portfolio, so I cannot comment on the details, but I do know that policy officials in the Scottish Government and in DWP engage on an ongoing basis to determine how workable the Scottish Government's proposals on split payments are, and that work will continue.

Patrick Grady: If two people in the same household work for the same employer, they do not receive one wage; they each receive a separate salary at the end of every month. If the point of universal credit is to mimic wages to help people to get back into work, why on earth do the Government insist on not taking forward the idea of split payments for households?

Guy Opperman: This Government believe, as have every preceding Government, that most couples can and want to manage their finances jointly without state intervention, and it is not this Government's policy to make split payments by default. However, we are looking at the proposed Scottish pilot and, at the same time, by the end of the summer all jobcentres will have domestic abuse specialists to support work coaches and raise awareness.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Who is impacted more by the introduction of universal credit: women or men?

Guy Opperman: Women and men have benefited equally from the improvements that universal credit has brought in. There is unquestionable improvement in the outlook for women on a long-term basis as a result of the introduction of universal credit.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend welcome the decision to ensure that universal credit is paid to the main carer in the household, so that more women can make sure that their families are well supported?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has highlighted this and is bringing forward proposals to ensure that the main carer is the recipient. In particular, we are looking at the universal credit application form to ensure that the identification of the bank account can be done in an appropriate way.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am sure that the Minister is aware of the difficulties that Women's Aid and other domestic abuse charities have highlighted. Will he explain to the House how those difficulties will be addressed?

Guy Opperman: That is a very broad question, and I will ensure that the Minister writes to the hon. Gentleman specifically on the work that is being done with Women's Aid on an ongoing basis. There is a wholehearted strategy on domestic abuse and support for women in this context that is being addressed on a multitude of levels.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Minister has repeatedly said that split payments would be too difficult and that the Government would therefore be unwilling to consider that option at this time. However, the Scottish Government and the Social Security Minister have proved that it is possible to ensure that split payments are the default. Does he accept that, by not doing this, he is simply compounding financial insecurity and leaving women in potentially perilous situations?

Guy Opperman: Split payments are available on request. No information is needed to get a split payment. However, 60% of payments are already paid into a woman's bank account. As I outlined to my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), main carer recipient work is being done to ensure that this is done on a practical basis.

Women's Life Expectancy

2. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implications for Government policy of the most recent ONS statistics on women's life expectancy in the poorest areas of England. [910533]

13. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implications for Government policy of the most recent ONS statistics on women's life expectancy in the poorest areas of England. [910546]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Preventing health problems is the best way to improve life expectancy. We are taking action on childhood obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease and action to reduce smoking rates. Later this year, my Department will produce a prevention Green Paper, which will set out cross-Government plans for prevention in greater detail.

Chi Onwurah: In Newcastle, cervical cancer screening rates are significantly lower in more deprived areas of the city, and the recent Macmillan cancer inequalities report showed that more deprived areas had worse access to cancer treatment. This is because people on lower incomes are more likely to be on zero-hour contracts and juggling childcare and other caring responsibilities with work, and therefore less able to access fixed-time appointments in places outside their local community. What is the Minister doing to ensure that the healthcare system reflects the lives of those in the poorest areas and to raise incomes so that we have fewer cancer and health inequalities?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We know that we need to make it easier to book appointments and more convenient for women to attend them. That is why Sir Mike Richards is undertaking a comprehensive review of screening programmes. It will look at how we can improve the uptake and set out clear recommendations on how we can make those screening programmes more accessible.

Diana Johnson: ONS figures published in March 2019 show that the life expectancy of women in the poorest UK regions fell by 98 days between 2012 and 2017. Given that this is the first time that that has happened in peacetime since the Victorian era, what conclusions does the Minister draw from the fact that it has happened only since 2010?

Stephen Hammond: The conclusion I draw is to look at Public Health England's recent review, which made it clear that it is not possible to attribute the slowdown in the improvement of life expectancy to any single cause. That is why we are not complacent, as I said in answer to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah). The Budget saw us fully fund the situation with a big cash boost, and there will be a prevention Green Paper and we have a prevention vision. All that will contribute towards ensuring that life expectancy, which has not been as good as one would have liked, improves.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Smoking rates among pregnant women, particularly in poorer regions, remain stubbornly high, so what action is my hon. Friend taking to reduce smoking rates in order to make pregnancy and childbirth easier for young people?

Stephen Hammond: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), the Government have already put in place prevention programmes to ensure a reduction in smoking rates. The prevention vision and the prevention Green Paper will set out the means by which smoking can be reduced further to support people, pregnant or otherwise.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Life expectancy has fallen for the poorest women over the past nine years. What is the Minister's analysis of why that has happened?

Stephen Hammond: I answered that question just a moment ago. As I said, Public Health England's recent review made it clear that it is not possible to attribute the slowdown to any one cause. It is therefore important to tackle all the causes of the deterioration in life expectancy, which is why the Government will publish a prevention Green Paper later this year.

Domestic Abuse: Medical Training

3. **Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab):** What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on improving training for frontline medical staff to help identify domestic abuse. [910534]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Tackling domestic abuse is a key priority for this Government. That is why we have put £2 million into expanding the pilot programme, which will create a model health response for survivors of domestic violence and abuse. Training for frontline medical staff to help identify domestic abuse is included in a wide range of training and education curriculums for health staff.

Vicky Foxcroft: According to Women's Aid's "Survival and Beyond" report, 54% of women experiencing sexual and physical abuse meet the criteria for at least one common mental health disorder. I note what the Minister says about training, but what specific domestic abuse training is the Department considering to ensure that it actually happens?

Stephen Hammond: I commend the hon. Lady's work on the all-party parliamentary group on domestic violence and abuse. She will know that the Department produced a domestic abuse resource for health professionals that advises them on how best to support adults and young people over 16 who are experiencing domestic abuse, and that training is available now.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the publication of a definition of domestic abuse will help frontline staff to identify victims?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. The definition, which also includes factors such as mental health and economic issues, will make things much clearer for frontline staff and help them to understand and look for incidents of domestic violence and abuse.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The most recent survey of women's prisons shows that nearly 65% of prisoners have had a significant acquired brain injury, which often relates directly to their offending behaviour. The vast majority of the 65% have suffered domestic violence, so should we not be screening every woman as she arrives in prison to ensure that they get the neuro-rehabilitation support they need?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and he will know that the Government have committed extra money to ensure women prisoners get the support they need for neuro problems when they enter prison.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Domestic violence can be extremely damaging for the children who witness it. What is the Minister doing to support those children?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend raises an important point, because domestic violence clearly impacts the whole of family life, and there is evidence that children are also affected. We need to ensure that there are no legal barriers to sharing data to protect children or vulnerable adults, and we need to ensure that the £8 million we are spending will help those children recover from domestic violence.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Health-based independent domestic violence advisers can identify victims of domestic violence that other services are unable to detect. SafeLives, the national domestic abuse charity, suggests that domestic violence often goes undetected among elderly and black, Asian and minority ethnic victims. Surely, by placing these professionals in an A&E environment, countless victims could be identified and helped. Will the Minister commit to placing independent domestic violence advisers in all A&E departments?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We need to ensure that people are properly triaged for all sorts of diseases when they turn up at A&E, including domestic violence. I will reflect on her point and talk to NHS England about it.

Women Entrepreneurs

4. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps she is taking to help women entrepreneurs grow their businesses. [910535]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Since 2012, 62,949 start-up loans worth £489.5 million have been made to business owners, and 39% of those loans went to female entrepreneurs. In response to the Rose review, an industry-led taskforce will look at driving greater investment in female entrepreneurs by finance providers. The Government are also establishing a new investing in women code, through which financial institutions will take steps to improve the allocation of funding to female entrepreneurs.

Theresa Villiers: It is worrying that the Rose review concluded that only one in three active entrepreneurs is a woman, so will the Minister take action to respond to the recommendations of the Rose review so that more women can turn their great business ideas into great businesses?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my right hon. Friend for highlighting that particular finding. It is our ambition to increase the number of female entrepreneurs by half by 2030. The new investing in women code will drive more funding for women and encourage more women to start businesses. Alison Rose is already taking several recommendations forward with the backing of industry. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities is bringing forward the Government's strategy to address persistent gender economic barriers facing women across the country at every level.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that an increasing number of women entrepreneurs are using digital blockchain tools to start and grow their businesses? Will she meet people who can introduce her to blockchain solutions, and will she say something to her colleagues in the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority to encourage such use?

Kelly Tolhurst: I would be very happy to meet women who are using all manner of tools. I met eBay yesterday, and it talked about the work it is doing to encourage women to start their own businesses. It particularly talked about how it is working with retail businesses in Wolverhampton. I am always available to speak about anything that will encourage women in business—in fact, not just women but all people.

Workplace Harassment

6. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of introducing a duty on employers to prevent workplace harassment. [910537]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): The Government strongly condemn sexual harassment in the workplace and are committed to seeing it end. Employers are already responsible for preventing sexual harassment in their workplace and can be held legally liable if they do not, but we are consulting this summer to gather evidence on whether reinforcing this with a proactive duty would lead to better prevention of this terrible practice in the workplace.

Bill Esterson: Women who work in the retail and hospitality sectors in the UK have little protection when they face workplace harassment, which is something that happens far too often. As last year's Presidents Club scandal shows, employers have no duty to protect their staff. May I encourage the Minister, when she carries out that review, to give serious consideration to reinstating section 40 of the Equality Act 2010 to give women the protection at work they have every right to deserve?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this, because it is important; every woman—indeed, every person—should be able to enjoy their place of work without the threat or risk of sexual harassment. I take issue gently with him on section 40. He may know that it was used only twice when it was in force and it had the three strikes approach, which we believe was one reason why it was not used as often as it should have been. We are very open-minded; we have this consultation, and I encourage everyone to participate in it, so that we can find solutions that suit not just employees, but responsible employers.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Has the Minister thought about looking at the system of protected conversations that was introduced by the coalition Government? Given the nature of such conversations, that system could give a licence to employers to engage in harassment in conversations that then, under statute, cannot be quoted at subsequent hearings.

Victoria Atkins: I am happy to look at that. As I say, we will be consulting in the summer. We want also to understand the scale of sexual harassment in the workplace. By definition, it tends to be activity that is hidden and there is stigma to it. We want absolutely to make the point that it is not right for anyone, of any gender, of any sexuality, to suffer this sort of behaviour in the workplace.

Gender Pay Gap

7. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that businesses are held to account on reducing the gender pay gap. [910538]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): Gender pay gap reporting provides transparency for everyone in holding employers to account, and many organisations already recognise that closing the gap makes good business sense. I am writing to public sectors employers who are within scope of the regulations to urge them to develop action plans, and meeting influential business leaders to press them to take action in their sectors to make the best of the potential that their female employees can provide to them.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. What early assessment has she made of successful business compliance performance compared with that of last year?

Victoria Atkins: Before I answer that, I feel obliged to wish my hon. Friend good luck in the London marathon this weekend, as I do to all Members of this House who will be running those 26 miles—we hope it will be good weather.

I am sure the whole House joins me in being delighted that we have exceeded last year's compliance levels, with 95% of all employers believed to be in scope in the regulations having reported their data by the deadlines. We are confident that 100% compliance will be achieved shortly, and we have already seen the reporting rates rise to 98%.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): When across 45% of firms the discrepancy in pay increase is in favour of men this year, it is now clear that the Government's policy of asking companies simply to report on the gender pay gap is not enough. I welcome the Minister's response to the question about encouraging people, but will she now heed our advice and make it mandatory for companies also to produce action plans on how they will defeat this inequality against women?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I know she shares my enthusiasm and determination on this point. She will be pleased that already just under 50% of employers within scope are publishing their own action plans—they are doing that because they understand it makes good business sense. We believe that this is the best approach. Interestingly, 56% of employers have reported either reductions in their gender pay gaps or the fact that they are staying the same. There is a great deal of work to do, but we have to bring business with us; businesses have to realise that it makes good business

sense to close their gap and to treat their female staff properly. We believe that by encouraging them we will bring about the best result.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I welcome the progress that has been made in closing the gender pay gap and increasing the representation of women on company boards, but what are the Government doing to support low-paid, low-skilled women, who often seem to be left out of the conversation?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has distilled into his question the important point that the gender pay gap is not just about the heads of companies—directors and so on—important though that aspect is; it is also about helping women at the very lowest ends of the pay scales. We want to encourage them to seek better jobs and have better incomes. That is precisely why my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities is setting out a strong strategy on economic empowerment for women, so that they are treated fairly in the workplace, no matter their pay level, and ensuring that employers realise that if they are going to get the best of their workforce, they need to pay their female staff properly.

Universal Credit: Effect on Women

8. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on women. [910539]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Universal credit treats all genders equally, and female employment is at a record high. The changes to the tax threshold and the national living wage and the increases to the universal credit work allowance will specifically assist women more on an ongoing basis.

Jessica Morden: On behalf of the Go Girls, a group of young parents in Newport, may I raise with the Minister one of the unfairnesses of the universal credit system? Lone parents who are under 25 get paid a lower rate than they would have been paid under tax credits, causing great hardship to young parents and children. Will the Minister help me to lobby the Department for Work and Pensions on the issue?

Guy Opperman: I note the point, which I have discussed with the hon. Lady previously. I am happy for the Minister with responsibility for this specific matter to sit down with the hon. Lady and her particular constituents to ensure that it is addressed, but I should make the point that this April we brought in the £1,000 increase to the UC work allowance, which should make a difference in the interim, before such a conversation takes place.

Topical Questions

T1. [910547] **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): It is incredibly important to provide support and a route back to work for people who have taken time out to care

for others, and we want to find out the most effective way of doing so. Today, I am announcing that, as part of our returners programme, we are awarding grants to the Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation; to One Ark in Liverpool; to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, for projects in Yorkshire and Humber; and to Carer Support Wiltshire. These grants will be used for a number of initiatives to make it easier for people to return to the labour market and to discover how best to keep people economically active.

Mary Glendon: The housing association Habinteg recently launched a new advisory group for disabled people. The group has highlighted the impact that not having an accessible home has on people's employment, health and wellbeing. Will the Minister agree to meet representatives of the group to discuss their real concerns?

Penny Mordaunt: There is no excuse for new build homes especially not to be accessible. The Global Disability Innovation Hub set a challenge and has demonstrated that accessible homes can be built with no greater footprint and at no greater cost, so there is no excuse for local authorities not to do so. I would be happy to meet those representatives, and will suggest that to the Minister for Disabled People, too.

T2. [910548] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Government have embarked on a significant programme of improvements to the transport system. Will they use their position in the public procurement process to support efforts to get more women working in construction, engineering and the railways?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): My right hon. Friend raises an important point, and the Government take these issues very seriously. For example, our apprenticeship diversity champions network is working in partnership with employers to help to overcome gender stereotypes in sectors such as science, technology, engineering and maths and industries such as construction. My right hon. Friend will be pleased to know that since 2010 there has been a 26% increase in the number of girls entering STEM A-levels in England, and that in the United Kingdom the number of women accepted on to full-time STEM undergraduate courses since 2010 has increased by 28%.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On 22 April, we marked the very first National Stephen Lawrence Day. It has been 26 years since his tragic racist murder. Sadly, as the Prime Minister acknowledged, racism and racial discrimination are still very prevalent in our society.

In 2018, the UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance stated that any measure that directly or indirectly targets and undermines the rights of marginalised groups must be understood as breaking international human rights law. This Government have presided over an immigration enforcement system in which people are being unfairly racially profiled; refused to allow people to bring forward discrimination claims based on more than one aspect of their identity; introduced voter ID, which will disenfranchise marginalised communities; failed to act on the results of their own racial disparity audit; and introduced hostile-environment

policies. Will the Minister inform the House whether, as well as breaking the UN's human rights law, her Government are institutionally racist or just do not care?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises some very important issues. I am sorry about the tone of her question, because I do not recognise the attitude that she implies among my colleagues, including the Prime Minister, who has done some groundbreaking work in this area. What I would say to her and other hon. Members who rightly are concerned about these issues is that part of the motivation for moving the Government Equalities Office into the Cabinet Office, so that it can sit alongside the race disparity team, is to look at these things in the round. As well as the issues that she identified, individuals in this country face multiple discrimination. For example, an enormous number of people sleeping on the streets in London are young, gay, black men. Only by working together and looking at the disaggregated data will we really understand how we can improve lives for everyone in this country.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Being part of the LGBT community is not a lifestyle choice and learning about LGBT issues is not what makes someone gay, lesbian or trans. What is being done by the Government to ensure that those outdated views have no place in our future society?

Nick Gibb: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. We have been clear in introducing relationships education and relationships and sex education that they are designed to foster respect for others and for difference, and to educate pupils about the different types of healthy relationships. Teaching about the diverse society that we live in can be delivered in a way that respects everyone's views.

T3. [910550] **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): Because of the huge regional variations in maternity pay, according to the Fire Brigades Union's women's committee, most firefighters would be better off breaking a leg than having a baby. Will the Government consider an increased and properly enforced flat rate of maternity pay to tackle the gender and regional inequalities present in our fire service?

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her FBU question. I would suggest that the FBU—[*Interruption.*] I have said this before, because it concerns me that there are no women on the FBU executive council. If the fire brigades workforce are to be looked after as we want them to be—Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary recently published a report looking at facilities for female firefighters across the country and was concerned to see, for example, two services with no designated shower facilities for female firefighters—then these changes must be made from the very top of our fire brigade community, making sure that women's voices are heard, because they are absolutely essential as part of our firefighting workforce.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Department of Health guidance in Northern Ireland says that Northern Ireland doctors referring women to GEO-funded free abortions in England could be breaking the criminal law.

Will the Minister publish her legal advice to enable the Department of Health to change that guidance, which surely is erroneous? Will she update the House on what she is doing to help women in Northern Ireland, such as Sarah Ewart and others, who are being required by law to continue pregnancies where doctors have already told them that their babies will die before they are born or shortly after?

Penny Mordaunt: May I start by thanking my right hon. Friend and the Women and Equalities Committee for an incredibly important piece of work? It not only looked at the legal and human rights issues, but got on record public opinion and the opinion of healthcare and legal professionals in Northern Ireland and showed the complete paucity of care being endured by women in Northern Ireland. With specific regard to the legal advice, I clarified in my evidence to her Committee via a letter that the legal advice that we received when the scheme was set up meant that it would not be a crime to refer to those services and that the issue that she raised in her question does not stand.

I have also met with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who looks at health inequalities. She believes that she already has the powers to provide guidance to ensure that no one is deterred from referring someone to a healthcare service that they need, and where their life may be in danger if they do not receive it, because of fear that doing so might be a crime. That is completely bogus, and she has undertaken to do that immediately. However, there is obviously more to do to put right this issue—with apologies for adding to my answer, Mr Speaker—so that every citizen of the United Kingdom can have the healthcare services that they need.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We are running very late. I can live with that because my intention is, as always, to accommodate Back-Bench Members, but they could help each other by now contenting themselves with single-sentence questions.

T4. [910551] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What are the Government concretely doing to keep their promise to keep under review their rejection of lasting national legislation to protect women who enter abortion clinics? Ealing's pioneering buffer zone is now a year old, but it is going to need renewal. Councils are cash strapped and the Government have said that not enough women are being harmed. How many would it take—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but I clearly said that Members should be asking single-sentence questions. People have to be able to adjust. It is not difficult.

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who has done a great deal of work on this issue in her constituency. We are keeping this matter under review. We are keen that local councils are able to use the powers that they have under the antisocial behaviour laws, if appropriate in their areas.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Recent research shows that the HPV vaccine has led to a dramatic decline in cervical cancer. Having a vaccination saves lives, so can

we use this opportunity to urge mums and dads across the UK to ensure that their kids have the measles vaccine?

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): My hon. Friend is exactly right. The evidence is clear that the MMR vaccine is safe and effective. Mums and dads should ensure that their children are vaccinated.

T5. [910552] **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): EVA Women's Aid in my constituency, which deals with nearly 1,000 vulnerable women a year, has had its rape and sexual abuse support fund grant cut, forcing it to look to close services. Will the Minister join me in urging her colleagues at the Ministry of Justice, which funds the organisation, to reconsider these cuts before crucial services to vulnerable women in Redcar and Cleveland are lost?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): As the hon. Lady will know, we are doing a great deal to support women, and men, who have suffered from domestic violence. The Domestic Abuse Bill is currently being looked at. The Government have pledged an additional £20 million over this Parliament to support victims and organisations combating domestic abuse. Women's Aid does a fantastic job.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): In light of recent objection to the Hereditary Titles (Female Succession) Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that would address the discrimination against daughters when it comes to inheritance, when do the Government intend to end the practice of male primogeniture?

Penny Mordaunt: The Daughters' Rights campaign was started after one new mum was told that her new arrival being a girl must have been a disappointment to her. This matter and the issue of courtesy titles are complex matters, but we do need to look at them in this modern age. My Department is working on that, and I welcome the Daughters' Rights campaign.

T6. [910553] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister said that there was more to do in relation to abortion services in Northern Ireland. Will she set out how, with the absence of the Northern Ireland Executive, she will work across Government to ensure that there is a clear framework and timeline for stopping the breaches of women's human rights in Northern Ireland and for when we will be compliant with the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women?

Penny Mordaunt: The Northern Ireland Office has the lead on this issue, and it is waiting on a potential declaration of incompatibility. There has never been a case of such a declaration being issued and the Government not taking action. I alluded earlier to the fact that I am focusing on what we can do with the powers that we have to ensure that, within the current restrictions, every woman who needs particular healthcare services has access to them.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Shared parental leave is a good option for families, but take-up remains low. Will my right hon. Friend join me in urging the Business Secretary to introduce a standalone

period of parental leave just for partners, to give families more choices and help women to balance work and family?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that she has been doing to campaign on this issue, along with a number of our Conservative colleagues. We are looking at this as part of the women's economic empowerment strategy. We want parents to have the choice as to how they share caring responsibilities, and we know that there are practical, as well as cultural, barriers to them doing so.

T7. [910554] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): When will the Government consult on changes to the law to protect employees from being sexually harassed by customers or clients? It was announced last December. When will it take place?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady may have heard my answer to a previous question. We will consult in the summer on sexual harassment in the workplace and I would encourage her and all colleagues across the House to contribute to that consultation.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Against the background of the highest ever level of employment in our country's history, which employment rate is growing faster—male or female?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Both are growing, but female in particular.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Can the Minister detail what the terms of reference will be for the period poverty taskforce and confirm how many members will be chosen to ensure diverse representation?

Penny Mordaunt: I refer the hon. Lady to a written ministerial statement I tabled this week for an update. The first meeting of the taskforce will be in June, and we will be making announcements about who will be on it, but it will have three co-chairs: one from Government, one from the private sector and one from the charity and social sector.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): In the response to the consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004, what consideration is being given to the approach of the International Association of Athletics Federations and its use of testosterone levels to determine whether a trans athlete competes in a women's or a men's race?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises an important issue, although it is slightly separate from the very narrow remit of the Gender Recognition Act. Every Department is facing all sorts of issues in relation to trans people, so we have brought together a team of Ministers and officials across Government to make sure that policy is where it needs to be. I have also had separate meetings with the Minister for Sport to discuss both elite and community sport. Many of these decisions, particularly at the elite level, are for sporting bodies to lead on, although there are safety issues as well. I can assure her that these will be ongoing meetings across all Departments and that we will make sure that every Department provides services and support and has the right policies in place for modern times.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm the Government's position on whether the automatic parental right of men who have fathered children through rape should be removed?

Lucy Frazer: I know that the hon. Lady is passionate about this, and I am pleased she has taken up this very important campaign. The Ministry of Justice is looking very closely at it. I have mentioned before that the civil procedure rule committee is looking at the issue she has raised in the past about applications to court. It will have a further meeting at the beginning of May, and I will be very happy to update her on that when the meeting has taken place.

Karen Lee: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Not now. We have three urgent questions and a business statement. There will be points of order in due course.

UK Telecoms: Huawei

10.48 am

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on the future role of Huawei in UK telecoms infrastructure.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The security and resilience of the United Kingdom's telecoms networks is of paramount importance. The UK has one of the world's largest and most dynamic economies, and we welcome open trade and inward investment in our digital sectors, but at the same time the UK's economy can only prosper when we and our international partners are assured that our critical national infrastructure remains safe and secure.

As part of our plans to provide world-class digital connectivity, including 5G, my Department has been carrying out a cross-Whitehall evidence-based review of the supply chain to ensure a diverse and secure supply base. The review aims to ensure stronger cyber-security across the entire telecommunications sector, greater resilience in telecommunications networks and diversity across the entire 5G supply chain. It has considered the full UK market position, including economic prosperity, corporate and consumer effects and the quality, resilience and security of equipment.

Despite the inevitable focus on Huawei, the review is not solely about one company or even one country. We have to strike a difficult balance between security and prosperity, and recognise the reality of globalised networks and supply chains, although I will make it clear that our security interests are pre-eminent and that has been the focus of this review. That is the way to ensure that the UK fully realises the potential of 5G through its safe and secure deployment.

As would be expected given the importance of the subject, it is a thorough review of a complex area, which has made use of the best available expert advice and evidence, including from the National Cyber Security Centre. It will report with its conclusions once ministerial decisions have been taken. The review is an important step in strengthening the UK's security framework for telecoms and ensuring the secure roll-out of 5G and full-fibre networks.

I am sure that the House will understand that National Security Council discussions should be confidential, and will understand why that must be the case. However, I know that Members on both side of the House feel strongly on this issue and I will make a statement to the House to communicate final decisions at the appropriate time.

Jo Platt: Thank you for granting this urgent question today, Mr Speaker.

What a mess we are in. The only reason we know of the decision to green-light Huawei is from an apparent ministerial leak of a meeting of the National Security Council, which has served only to raise public concern while undermining the integrity of our security agencies. Let me be clear from this side of the House: if a Minister did leak this information, they are not fit to serve in the cabinet and are certainly not fit to be Prime Minister. Indeed, if the leak was for an advantage in a

Tory leadership race, that would be truly shocking. Critical issues of national security should be handled with utmost care, not used as political ammunition in a Tory party civil war. A full leak inquiry should be undertaken, and if identified, the individual should immediately resign or be removed from their position.

Turning to the substance of the question, the decision to allow Huawei's involvement in building our 5G network raises some extremely serious questions that must be answered if we are to provide the public with concrete assurances about the integrity and safety of the network. Huawei is a company known from multiple public reports from our security services to manufacture sub-optimal equipment, often at a lower than average cost. Can the Minister clarify if the equipment described just two weeks ago by the technical director of the NCSC as "very, very shoddy" will be the same equipment green-lit for deployment in our networks?

We heard last month in a report from the Huawei oversight board, chaired by the head of the NCSC, that it still has only limited assurance that the long-term security risks presented by Huawei can be managed, and it is still identifying significant issues. For the benefit of the House, can the Minister confirm that is still the opinion of the security services when the Prime Minister has decided to allow them access to our 5G networks for the decades to come?

We need not listen only to the security services: listen to Huawei itself. In a letter to the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee in February, it said that it will take three to five years to see tangible results from its reform programme. Just weeks after those warnings, why has the company been given the go-ahead to help to build our critical national infrastructure?

Why are we in this situation today? Ultimately, the chronic lack of investment by the Government has meant that we are without thriving digital or manufacturing industries capable of producing this equipment, leaving us reliant on foreign suppliers. To that end, the Government must be called out for their negligence. The only way we will keep Britain safe and secure in the 21st century is by investing in our industries, rebuilding Britain and always placing security ahead of cost. That is exactly what a Labour Government would do.

Jeremy Wright: First, let me repeat what I said a moment or two ago. A final decision has not been made on this subject, so the hon. Lady is wrong to describe matters in the way that she has. However, I entirely agree with what she said about the leak of any discussions in the National Security Council. As she says, there is good reason for such discussions to be confidential, and I hope the House will understand that I do not intend to discuss here, or anywhere other than in the National Security Council, the matters that should be discussed there. The reason we do not is that officials, including the security and intelligence agents she has referred to in her remarks, which I will come back to, need to feel that they can give advice to Ministers that Ministers will treat seriously and keep private. If they do not feel that, they will not give us that advice, and government will be worse as a result. That is why this is serious, and that is why the Government intend to treat it seriously, as she and the whole House would expect.

I shall now respond to the other points that the hon. Lady raised. She made reference, quite properly, to the work of the oversight board. Of course the oversight

board is evidence of the fact that we have arrangements in place for the management of Huawei technology that do not exist for the management of equipment supplied by others; there is reason for that. The oversight board's concerns are, as she says, about the technical deficiencies of the equipment that Huawei is supplying. They are serious concerns; they need to be addressed. They are not, as she will recognise, concerns about the manipulation of that equipment by foreign powers, but they are none the less serious and they will be addressed. The objective of this review is to ensure that the security of the supply network, regardless of who the equipment supplier is, is improved. That is our objective, and it would be wrong to focus entirely on Huawei, or even, as I said, on Chinese equipment.

However, it is worth recognising that Chinese equipment—and, indeed, Huawei equipment—is prevalent across the world, not just in the United Kingdom. There is a good deal of Huawei equipment already in the UK networks, so we are not talking about beginning from a standing start, but it reinforces, in my view, the need to ensure that this review of the supply chain is broadly based—as it is—to ensure that we address the security of the network, regardless of where the equipment comes from.

Finally, on the issue of the security and intelligence agencies, as the hon. Lady would expect, we take full account of what the security and intelligence agencies have advised us on this subject, and she has my reassurance, as does the House, that we will continue to take seriously what they tell us, because it is a key component of the review that is being conducted—and that is being conducted, as I have indicated, with the full input of the National Cyber Security Centre.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend is quite right to make no comment at all on an apparent leak from an organisation like the National Security Council. But questions must be asked as to why a document such as this, of such huge national and international security importance, was being discussed openly at the National Security Council, and indeed the content of the document itself equally is worthy of much further inquiry across Whitehall and in this place. Would my right hon. and learned Friend perhaps welcome an inquiry by the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, on which I serve, into the document, the way it was handled by the National Security Council, and the way in which the leak occurred?

Jeremy Wright: I think it is entirely appropriate for the Committee on which my hon. Friend serves to make inquiries as it thinks fit. It is not a matter for me or for the Government to indicate what it should or should not do. He will recognise, of course, that these are documents that should be discussed by the National Security Council—it is a way in which the National Security Council can make sensible and properly informed decisions—but as I said a moment or so ago, and as he knows full well from his own experience, that will become less and less likely to happen, and decisions will get less and less properly based, if we cannot trust people to keep private what should be kept private.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): As I see it, there are two major considerations. In the UK we are lagging behind China, the USA and South Korea. The fact that

we are even talking about this issue is a strong indication that there has been a lack of a realistic UK Government-backed strategy, and that has allowed us to fall behind, and we are now facing tough decisions, which could and should have been avoided. There is the threat of espionage, which is obviously denied by China. There have been persistent rumours since 2012 of an elite cyber-warfare unit using either Huawei's software or flaws in it. Why it should go to such lengths when the NSC leaks like a sieve is beyond me, but if we do not know, how we can possibly take that risk?

I have two brief questions for the Secretary of State. Can he define the “core” and the “edge” of a 5G network and assure me that it cannot be compromised from either side? As EE is building 4G to carry emergency services, with its planned 5G piggybacking on that, will Huawei's 5G plan disrupt that service?

Jeremy Wright: First, there is no lack of UK strategy. We have a clear intent to make maximum use of 5G technology. That is important because, as the hon. Gentleman will recognise, in order for our economic development to be as successful as we all want it to be, this country will need to embrace this technology and make use of it in a variety of ways. The option of simply saying we will not engage in 5G technology is not available to us, nor should it be, and I know he does not argue for that.

If we need to provide for 5G networks, I repeat that it is important to be realistic and to recognise that Huawei is a significant player in this market. There are few others—and, by the way, the others that exist use Chinese equipment or assemble their components in China. The idea that any option available to us could completely exclude Chinese equipment or involvement of any kind is, I am afraid, not realistic.

It is also worth saying, for the reassurance of the hon. Gentleman and others, that we already take action to, for example, exclude Huawei from sensitive networks. There is no Huawei equipment in defence or intelligence networks. The division between core and access networks—which, as he says, is technically complex—is something we will need to address in the review, but I would much prefer that we discuss that review in the round when it has been properly developed, rather than attempt to do it piecemeal on the back of incomplete leaks.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The Secretary of State talks about coming to the House with a final decision. Is this not an opportunity to have a wide-ranging debate about this issue? There are many technical, political and security considerations. If the US and Australia can block Huawei without damaging their trading relationships with China, it raises the question of why the United Kingdom could not do the same.

Jeremy Wright: I recognise my hon. Friend's considerable interest and expertise in this field. I will say two things to him. First, he is entirely right that Australia has decided to exclude Huawei completely from these systems. The United States has not yet made such a decision. It does so from federal networks, but it has not yet decided what its approach will be in the areas we are considering.

As my hon. Friend knows, I always welcome wide-ranging debate and am happy to come to the House for it. The difficulty is that, in order to have such debate,

[Jeremy Wright]

we need to have access to material that is very hard to share with the House. That is why these discussions are had at the National Security Council and why decisions must, in the end, be reached there. It is then the responsibility of Ministers—I take this responsibility seriously—to come to the House and explain those decisions to the greatest extent possible, with those caveats. I always intended to do so and still intend to do so.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Why does the Secretary of State think that Australia has taken that decision?

Jeremy Wright: I do not answer for the Australian Government; the hon. Lady would have to ask them. We are all—this applies particularly to Five Eyes partners—wrestling with these complex questions, and we may reach differing conclusions. There is good sense in having those conversations as extensively and often as we can. In fact, the Government will be doing so shortly with security and intelligence partners, and I have no doubt that this subject will be high on the agenda.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that partners—in fact, our closest intelligence partners—have been very clear in their views on this decision? Indeed, the Australian Signals Directorate made a very clear statement only a number of months ago in which it said that there was no such division between core and non-core, because the nature of 5G includes the whole gamut of the technology in one, and therefore the distinction possible in 3G and 4G is no longer feasible.

Does my right hon. and learned Friend also agree that this is not simply a technical issue—arguing about whether we would be vulnerable to espionage in a broad sense or whether Huawei would be able to Hoover up the digital exhaust that is in fact the gold mine for so many businesses today—but a diplomatic one, undermining the trust that has built the 70-year relationship we know as the Five Eyes community, which keeps threats away from our shores and ensures the security of our citizens around the world? Does he not therefore see that this is fundamentally a diplomatic and political question, just as much as a technical one, and that respecting our Five Eyes partners is an essential part of the decision?

Jeremy Wright: On my hon. Friend's last point, I entirely agree. It is important that we do not just discuss these matters with our partners, but have rather more complex and detailed technical discussions about the precise restrictions we may all seek to impose, and there is no lack of respect for what they say in this. Of course, many of our Five Eyes partners are operating under some difficulty, as Members of this House are, in that they do not know all of the decision making because some of it is not yet complete.

It is worth recognising that my hon. Friend is right that the concerns our partners have expressed are legitimate concerns. We listen very carefully to what they say, and we listen very carefully too to what our own security and intelligence agencies say. For reasons he will appreciate perhaps better than almost anyone else in this House, I do not intend to go into any detail about that, but I

repeat my reassurance that we will act in full consideration of what they say, because it is an important and fundamental part of this review.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): This leak is not only embarrassing, but, I am afraid, symptomatic of a wider breakdown of discipline and collective responsibility in the Government. This decision should be taking into account both our national security needs and our technological requirements for the future. Those should be the only two things under consideration by Ministers, not their own political share price or anything else. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that, in our altered post-Brexit geopolitical position, there is no question of future trade requirements or the urgency of a trade deal with China influencing national security judgments?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with what the right hon. Gentleman has said about the importance of this decision and the considerations that legitimately play a part. This decision will be taken by the Government as a whole, but the recommendations of this review have been produced by my Department in collaboration with the intelligence agencies, particularly the National Cyber Security Centre, as I have said. We have done that with the country's security considerations pre-eminent among the issues that are discussed and will be put forward at that review. That will remain the case for as long as I lead this Department and have anything to say about it.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): We are only here today because there has been a leak. That is incredibly regrettable for the whole of the House—I have heard that opinion from both sides of the House—and national security could not be a more important topic for all of us to be discussing. I am a little concerned that the leak may be trivialised by saying that it is as a result of someone's leadership campaign. I am more concerned that it may be as a result of whistleblowing, because the process is so concerning to someone that they have felt the need to break the bond of trust that has existed for so long.

I accept that the review is going on at the moment in great secrecy, but since this has now been brought out into the open, can my right hon. and learned Friend assure the House that absolutely every consideration will be given to all the concerns that have been raised by hon. Members here today about both our relationship with countries such as Australia and our cyber-security and national security? Importantly, will he make sure that some concept of future deals with China is not colouring what we must now have absolutely at the forefront of our mind—the safety of the British public?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. That will indeed be the focus of this review, as she has just heard me say. I do not think that the motivation for this leak matters in the slightest. This was unacceptable, and it is corrosive of the ability to deliver good government, which is something for which we must all take responsibility. In discussions of this kind, people are entitled to express whatever views they wish—and they do—but once the discussion has been held, collective responsibility requires that people do not repeat their views publicly, and they certainly should not discuss matters that have a security implication of

this kind. I think that is clear, and the majority of Members of the House will agree. We will return to the substance of this issue when I have the opportunity to speak rather more freely than I can at the moment, and I will of course give the House as much detail as I can.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Protecting this country's national security must be non-negotiable, but there have also been reports, including in *The Daily Telegraph*, that Chinese technology companies have been complicit in the internal repression of ethnic Muslims in western China. That involves the internment of hundreds of thousands of people in "re-education" camps, and the creation of a surveillance state, and it is possible that that includes Huawei. Is the Secretary of State aware of any allegations that specifically involve Huawei, and if so, should we be doing business with a company that engages in that sort of activity?

Jeremy Wright: As the right hon. Gentleman says, our concerns about Huawei are at least in part due to the potential interlocking nature of what it does and what the Chinese state does. That lies at the heart of our concerns, hence the oversight mechanisms with which he is familiar. We will, of course, take full account not just of what he has said, but of all our other information when making our judgment. He will understand that the involvement of the intelligence and security agencies in that process is fundamental and integral, and it means that we can get a good sense of the sort of information he describes.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am not encouraging my right hon. and learned Friend to comment on the substance of leak, but while that leak might become the subject of a criminal investigation, does he agree it is important that people both in and outside this House choose their words carefully when talking about what happened yesterday?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with my hon. Friend, as she would expect, and she speaks with experience on this matter. We cannot exclude the possibility of a criminal investigation, and everybody will want to take that suggestion seriously. We are all entitled to say what many of us have already said about the undesirability of this kind of leak, and it is perfectly proper for the House to express its concern in such a way.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is being very open and reasonable, but does he agree that fundamentally this is all about trust? When I was a very young MP, one of my first parliamentary jobs was to go to Hong Kong as part of a parliamentary delegation, to assess the agreement that this country reached with China on the future of Hong Kong. This very week we have seen how China has shredded that agreement by taking those democracy protesters and giving them long prison sentences. The Secretary of State says that we want a broad-ranging inquiry, but Syngenta in my constituency has been taken over by ChemChina. That is not on the stock exchange; that is the Chinese Government buying into our economy. We must look at that seriously as it is a question of trust.

Jeremy Wright: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns, and as I have said, the approach that we take to Huawei is different in nature to the approach we

already take to other suppliers of similar equipment. He will recognise that the problem is not specific to the United Kingdom, and neither is it easy to resolve by simply saying, "We'll have nothing to do with the Chinese". As I have set out, a considerable amount of Chinese equipment is already in the system both here and elsewhere, and a considerable amount of Chinese components are in the supplies that we get from anywhere. This is not straightforward, hence the need for the type of review that we have engaged in, to discuss the issue sensibly and reach considered conclusions. The hon. Gentleman knows me well enough to know that that is my preferred approach, and that is what I intend to do.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the UK relies on many international tech companies for its digital and telecoms infrastructure? All have different levels of risk, but all have contributed to enabling the UK to have the largest digital economy as a percentage of GDP in the G20. Can he assure me that the British Government would not take undue and unnecessary risk with citizens' data or national security, whether our partners be Chinese or the US, international or domestic?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes a good point. As I said, the purpose of the review process is not simply to answer questions about Huawei or even to answer questions about China; it is to ensure that our telecoms supply chain is secure for the future regardless of where the equipment comes from. That is our objective and that is the sensible approach.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Since it was leaked that the Prime Minister has given the green light to Huawei's involvement with 5G, what representations has the Secretary of State had from Huawei's competitors?

Jeremy Wright: Again, I think the way in which the hon. Gentleman has phrased what has happened is incorrect. I have made clear what the position is. Of course, we will listen to those in the sector, as we listen to others. In the end, however, the judgment that the UK Government have to make is how we ensure that our telecoms system is secure, safe and provides the kind of 5G network that will be the foundation of our economic success in the future. That is the objective here and that is what we will pursue.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the Secretary of State set out what steps the Government are taking to ensure the UK remains at the forefront of the development of new technologies like 5G? In particular, what are the Government doing to ensure that rural areas, like those in my own constituency in the Scottish borders, are not left behind as the 5G network is rolled out?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is right. It is important that we recognise the need to ensure this technology serves our whole population and that its potential is properly developed. As he will know, the Government, in conjunction with others, are attempting to develop this technology in test beds, particularly, as he will know, in rural applications, which I hope will be of

[Jeremy Wright]

benefit to him and his constituents. I believe that that can transform how our citizens connect to the essential services we now all use.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I should declare an interest, having spent 20 years building out mobile and fixed networks around the world, working with a variety of vendors including Huawei and latterly for the regulator Ofcom.

Mobile networks are an increasingly critical part of our national infrastructure, but the regulatory framework has not kept pace since 2010. For example, it has not matched the resilience and security requirements of fixed networks. 5G makes mobile networks part of the everyday infrastructure of our lives, but it will be built out using existing components and network parts where, in many cases, Huawei is already present—it is based on 4G, for example. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need a transparent principles-based and standards-based resilience and security regulatory framework? Will he comment on why Ofcom has not provided that under the duties set out in section 105 of the Communications Act 2003? Will he ensure that in the future Ofcom has the resources and the powers to ensure it does?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady is right. The importance of the review is that it deals with the need to ensure security is in place for the mobile network, as it is elsewhere. That becomes increasingly important as we move towards extensive applications of 5G. That is the logic for the review. That is why it is important and that is why it is happening now. Ofcom will have its part to play in that process. She will understand why I do not talk now about the conclusions of the review, but I will discuss them when they are available. I have no doubt that she will wish to participate in that conversation.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Following on from the question from the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), does the Secretary of State recognise that there are legitimate human rights concerns about reports of the use of technology by Chinese authorities to monitor its own citizens—for example, the recent reports of the extensive use of facial recognition technology by Chinese law enforcement agencies to characterise people by social groups, race or ethnicity and to monitor the movements of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of minority Uighur Muslims simply going about their daily business?

Jeremy Wright: Those are legitimate concerns, and they are the reason why we have to consider companies that are closely connected with, or potentially influenced by, the Chinese state in a different category. As I have said, however, there is a practical problem, which is that if our objective were to exclude all Chinese equipment from these systems, we would find that exceptionally difficult to do. There is a balance to be struck. The purpose of this exercise is to ensure that we do not expose our systems and our citizens to risks that we can sensibly and prudently avoid. That is what the review is designed to do, and I believe that it will succeed.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When the Foreign Affairs Committee was in Beijing recently, every single person whom we spoke to made it absolutely clear that

the Chinese Communist party would stop at nothing to gain whatever economic or political advantage it could possibly achieve, whether through espionage, massive data gathering or the abuse of intellectual property rights. The people whom we met will be enormously sceptical about direct engagement with Huawei, a company that operates directly under Chinese law and is likely at any one moment suddenly to be seized by the Chinese state to perform its duties under that law rather than the law of this country.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, right about those concerns, which are legitimately held. Let me repeat, however—I know that he understands this—that we are not at a standing start. There is already considerable engagement with Huawei, not just in this country but around the world, and we seek to manage that process in the ways that he knows about. The long-term aspiration of broadening the market and diversifying suppliers is absolutely the right one, and I hope very much that the review will address those issues, too, but that in itself will not be a quick fix. We will seek to do it, but it will take some time to broaden the market beyond what are now essentially three suppliers in this space and three only.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If the National Security Council is not secure, what is the point of it?

Jeremy Wright: The point of the National Security Council is to enable us to discuss matters of national security, and we will continue to need to do that. I suspect that my hon. Friend will have detected in what I have said my view of the importance of those conversations remaining confidential.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Today's *Financial Times* quotes Rob Joyce, a senior cyber-security adviser to the US National Security Agency, as saying:

“We are not going to give them the loaded gun.”

He said of the oversight board:

“For eight years they have had the cyber security centre there and the last several years there have been some really horrific reports about the quality of that activity and what's being produced.”

How seriously should we take those comments?

Jeremy Wright: Of course we take comments of that kind seriously, but it is important when people reach a judgment on these matters that they are in possession of all the facts, all the evidence and all the advice that we receive from many sources, including the security and intelligence agencies. It is difficult for anyone who does not sit around the National Security Council table to have access to all those different materials, but, as I have said, what is important is that we produce a secure system that will deliver safely a 5G from which all our constituents will benefit—including, importantly, those in Warwickshire. That is what we seek to do, and that is what the review is for.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I, too, must declare an interest: I spent 31 years in the telecoms and high-tech industry before coming to this place.

My right hon. Friend has indicated that Huawei's technology, while niche, is not unique and that there are alternatives. The lesson of 3G and 4G procurement is that technological solutions came along quite quickly during the process. Will my right hon. Friend confirm

that, whatever decision is made, this process will be subject to open competition and companies will be able to compete freely for our business?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, whose experience is valuable in this discussion. He is right that we must also consider the competition aspects, not just from an economic point of view, but from a security point of view. It is obviously better to have a number of different suppliers, not just because it helps with the economics, but because it makes the network more secure. The difficulty, as he will recognise, is that essentially there are only three suppliers in this space: Huawei, Nokia and Ericsson. There are difficulties, on a number of levels, with the assumption that were we to exclude Huawei and rely entirely on the other two suppliers, we would have a safe network as a result. That is not the right assumption to make. That is why the review process is more complex than it might initially appear to be.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): As well as the current controversy over safety and security, there is another aspect to this: the safety of human health. Will the Secretary of State assure me that whatever company he chooses as the main contractor will have to take full account of the impact on human health and ensure that any infrastructure minimises any possible danger to human health?

Jeremy Wright: Of course that is important, and the hon. Gentleman will know that colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care are working on this. Whatever use we make of this technology and whoever supplies it, it is important that human health considerations are taken into account.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Over the past few years, many serious questions have been raised over Huawei, so it seems reckless even to consider it for the 5G network. The Secretary of State said earlier that Huawei is not operating in sensitive or defence areas, but as we become ever more reliant on the internet of things the ability to shut down a network poses a serious threat to our national security. If he is so confident about Huawei's integrity, why is it not operating in sensitive areas?

Jeremy Wright: We of course recognise that there is a material distinction between Huawei and other suppliers, and that is its potential interconnection with the Chinese state. It is therefore sensible for the UK to ensure that when we are dealing with particularly sensitive networks, Huawei is not involved. That process is well understood by both sides. Of course, the Chinese would apply a very similar principle to non-Chinese companies in China. But that is not what we are talking about in relation to the entire telecommunications network. The hon. Lady is entirely right that we must have the greatest possible security on our 5G systems, because as we do more and more with those systems, the consequences of someone being able to influence them at a fundamental level become more and more severe. That is exactly why the review is needed.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In the 1980s, Britain was a world leader in the development of fibre-optic broadband, but we have since lost that

capability as a result of the privatisation and fragmentation of Britain Telecom and GEC-Marconi. We are now reliant on Ericsson, Nokia and Huawei, as the Minister has said. Is it not clear that, with the development of the internet of things, which has huge industrial potential, the opportunity now is for Britain to build a national champion in this space, perhaps working with Five Eyes partners and other close allies, that could deliver an internationally competitive capability in its own right?

Jeremy Wright: I know that it is tempting for Opposition Members to blame everything on privatisation, but I do not think that is fair in this context. The point about a potential alternative contender, whether a national champion or something developed in concert with others, is something we should of course consider. However, as the hon. Gentleman will recognise, that will not happen overnight, even if we and others are determined to achieve it. The more pressing problem for us to address is this: if we need to get our 5G systems up and running—I suggest that we do, in order not to fall behind in all these important economic areas—we need a system in place that enables us to develop those networks with the existing technology coming from existing suppliers. I repeat that we have a very limited choice available to us. The purpose of the review is to find a way to navigate that marketplace without sacrificing our security.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Our security services say that this is the first ever leak from the National Security Council. May I press the Secretary of State to tell us whether there will be a criminal investigation?

Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Gentleman will recognise, that is not a matter for me. What I have said this morning—[*Interruption.*] What I said when I spoke 10 minutes ago was that I cannot rule that out, and nor can anyone else. It is a matter for the investigating and then prosecuting authorities to consider. It is not a matter for me. However, the leak can be condemned by us all, whether or not it is proceeded against in a criminal way.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Huawei has been banned from the core of 5G, but it is to be allowed to operate at the edge. The edge includes masts and antennas, which are also very sensitive. Canada and New Zealand have expressed concern, and Australia and the United States of America have said there is no relevant distinction between the core and the edge of 5G networks. What discussions has the Minister had with those four countries, and has their determination had any influence on our decision?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman will know from our discussions this morning that these are important conversations with our Five Eyes partners, and they are continuing, as he would expect. I repeat the point that, as yet, the final decisions on this matter have not been taken, so we should not characterise it in that sense. However, it is vital that when we come to make the decisions, we consider all relevant matters. I repeat my reassurance to him that the priority in all those considerations will be security. That is why this review was commenced in the first place. That is its purpose, and that is what we seek to achieve with it.

Electoral Registration: EU Citizens

11.31 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will please make a statement on the electoral registration process for EU citizens for the 2019 European elections.

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. It is important that we ensure that everyone is aware of what they can do to ensure they are able to exercise their right to vote, should that opportunity arise. We have been clear on our intention as a Government that we want to leave the EU as soon as possible and not have to hold these elections.

Electoral registration officers have a statutory duty to ensure that people who are eligible to vote in relevant elections have the opportunity to do so. With regard to the potential European parliamentary elections, that includes ensuring that EU citizens from other member states who are resident in the UK and registered to vote are aware that they need to complete a declaration, commonly referred to as a UC1 or EC6 form, in order to do so. I will place a copy of that form in the Library of the House today. To vote in the UK, citizens of other EU member states need to be registered to vote, and to complete the declaration form stating their wish to vote in the UK, by Tuesday 7 May 2019. This form is accessible on the Electoral Commission website and on local authority websites. This is to ensure that EU citizens do not vote twice—here and in their member state of origin—because it is obviously illegal to vote twice in the same election.

The Electoral Commission has issued advice on what action to take on this, and it was circulated to all local authority electoral officers on 4 April. The Electoral Commission's guidance advises that, while the law does not require electoral registration officers to send the form out to all EU citizens, it has in previous years advised that EROs should identify those local government electors who are EU citizens and send them a UC1 form, to help to ensure that they understand their options and are able to exercise their right to vote, should they wish to do so. It further advises that, if the date of the poll is confirmed, electoral registration officers be encouraged to take other steps to raise awareness, such as through social media channels and elsewhere. The Electoral Commission said that it was also looking to support EROs in this and to work with partners to spread the message more widely. The commission's advice is that EROs

“should think about how you can make EU citizens clear of the options available to them: the information on the UC1 form should help you to do this”.

While the Government support the work to encourage electoral registration, the legal process of registration is obviously the responsibility of electoral registration officers rather than the Government. Prior to the extension of article 50, we had already encouraged EU citizens to vote in their home countries in the 2019 European parliamentary elections. We expect that most EU citizens in the UK will have followed previous advice to ensure that they can vote in their member state of citizenship.

Catherine West: I am concerned that EU citizens living in the UK have to undergo a two-stage process to vote in the European elections. Even if they are already registered to vote in the local elections next Thursday, they are separately required, unlike UK nationals, to complete an additional form to vote in the European elections three weeks later. That added layer of administration is rightly designed to prevent EU citizens from voting twice. However, the Cabinet Office has also inferred that preferential status must not be conferred to EU citizens in the process. That scenario only really applies when the EU registers are open, but there is no uniformity among EU member states. Indeed, the majority of EU registers have now closed.

Under normal circumstances, had the Brexit shambles not taken over, councils would have written to EU citizens in January, when all EU registers were open, to confirm the UK register in good time. They would have sent out reminders and issued polling cards to electors who are already on the register for the local elections, but we are not in normal circumstances. Our participation in the European elections was confirmed by the Prime Minister very late in the day, and the additional EC6 process is largely superfluous given that the majority of EU registers have already closed.

Far from giving preference to EU citizens, these unusual circumstances and the Government's lack of action have helped to create an artificial barrier to the enfranchisement of EU citizens. Indeed, we are already hearing reports of a formal legal challenge to the Government. This is yet another Brexit mistake. In July 2018, the integrity of our democracy was questioned when Vote Leave was found guilty of breaking electoral law. Today, our democracy faces another threat: Government-sanctioned barriers that could prevent EU citizens from registering to vote.

There are now 13 days until the voter registration deadline. Given the shortness of time, and the late hour at which local authorities were informed of this major U-turn in Government policy on participation in the European elections, can the Minister answer one clear question? Will he confirm that local authorities will be permitted to register automatically EU citizens who are already registered to vote in next week's local elections, on 2 May, so that they can participate in the European elections a mere 21 days later?

Brandon Lewis: I have a couple of things to say to the hon. Lady. First, we obviously would not be in this position if she and more of her colleagues had voted for the deal on 29 March, because we would not be holding these elections, and there still may be an opportunity not to hold them. Secondly, local elections are different, because residents can vote more than once, in different places where they pay council tax. The structure is very different—*[Interruption.]* I can see the hon. Lady gesticulating, but people can vote more than once in local elections, as Members of Parliament often do. Things are different in European elections, and it is right that we do what we can to ensure that people vote only once.

As for the process, if colleagues look at the UC1 form—as I said, I will lay a copy in the Library today for colleagues who have not seen it—they will see that it probably takes 30 seconds to a minute to complete. The same process was used in the 2014 European elections,

and it dates back to the European Parliamentary Elections (Franchise of Relevant Citizens of the Union) Regulations 2001, so some Labour Members will have supported it when they were in government.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given that today marks the nomination deadline for the European elections and that many local authorities will be considering sending out postal votes early in the process, will my right hon. Friend confirm what guidance has been given to electoral registration officers about postal votes, particularly for European citizens who choose to vote in these elections?

Brandon Lewis: The advice from the Electoral Commission to EROs is that they should follow the same processes. Everything will be exactly the same as it was in 2014, so there will be no difference in how postal vote notices go out. This is about ensuring that European residents who want to vote here and have not already registered to vote in their home member state, which we have been recommending for a year that they do, are able to register should they wish to do so.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for bringing this important question to the House.

It has never been the desire of the Labour party to take part in the upcoming European parliamentary elections. However, it is now becoming a reality following the Government's failure to reach a satisfactory Brexit deal. The uncertainty caused by the Government's shambolic Brexit negotiations is causing havoc in this country, particularly for electoral administrators who are now tasked with delivering a national poll at extremely short notice.

Some 2 million EU citizens who are already registered to vote in this country have until 7 May to complete and return a declaration form to take part in the European elections. In normal circumstances, returning officers would have started writing to registered EU citizens in January to ensure that they have completed the necessary paperwork, which cannot be done electronically. Prior to the 2016 EU referendum, the Electoral Commission began the process of identifying proposals for streamlining this administrative two-step process. However, because this Government repeatedly stated that European elections would not take place, the Electoral Commission decided not to continue working out this area of reform.

Because the Government maintained their position on EU elections at the eleventh hour, even when it was clear that their botched Brexit deal would not pass, returning officers have only just started the process of contacting registered European citizens. There are now only 13 days left until the deadline and, so far, fewer than 300 forms have been returned, which equates to 0.015% of registered EU citizens.

Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) raised our concerns that thousands of EU citizens will be casting their vote in local elections but will be denied that same right in the European elections, and that many are considering legal action. The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office,

the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), failed to provide proper assurances that this issue is being taken seriously.

Given the shortness of time and the late hour at which local authorities were informed of this major U-turn, we have four demands of the Government. Will they give EU citizens more time to return their declaration forms by extending the deadline from 7 May to 15 May? Will they provide EU citizens with more chances to be aware of their options by ensuring electors are handed a copy of the declaration form when they vote in local elections? Will they pay for all costs associated with maximising participation in the European elections by EU citizens, given the short notice and therefore the higher cost of getting people to sign up? And will they make the registration process easier by confirming that scanned or photographed forms are acceptable?

It is unacceptable that European citizens living here risk being denied their right to vote because of the Government's incompetent approach to Brexit. This chaos must end.

Brandon Lewis: On one of the hon. Lady's last points—I invite her to look at the form later in the Library—I am not sure how the form could be simplified any further. It literally takes 30 seconds to fill it in; it is a very simple, direct form. On the wider issues, the Electoral Commission is the body responsible for ensuring that these processes are followed through legally, and I am sure it will be listening and looking at what she has outlined.

We have been very clear about advising EU citizens over the last year to make sure that, for the European elections, those who wish to vote are registered in their home member state. As I said in my opening remarks, we expect that many will have done that, but there is the opportunity, if they wish to vote in the UK should we hold these potential elections, for them to do so by filling in a UC1 form.

The hon. Lady spoke about the deal, and I gently remind her that we are potentially fighting these elections because, when Labour Members had the chance to vote for a withdrawal agreement that fits their own party policy, they decided to play politics rather than deliver on the referendum.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council.

When voters in Kettering voted 61% to leave the European Union in the referendum three years ago, they did not expect to be asked to vote in European elections this year, and they find it ridiculous that they are being asked to do so. Fortunately, we have an excellent electoral services team at Kettering Borough Council. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will reimburse all the extra costs that councils will bear in arranging these elections?

Brandon Lewis: Obviously, I share my hon. Friend's view that nobody who voted in 2016, on either side of the debate, ever expected to vote in a European election again once they saw that result. I still hope there is an opportunity for them not to have to do so. As I say, I am disappointed that we are in this position at all, but these elections will follow the process that has been used previously—as they did in 2014; all the same processes will apply.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I am delighted to confirm that the Scottish National party is looking forward to the upcoming European elections, as an opportunity to demonstrate Scotland's opposition to Brexit and our commitment to the visions and ideals of the European Union, particularly the protection of the rights of its citizens. It is therefore concerning to hear that a lack of Government planning means that many EU citizens may be unable to register to vote in these elections.

Of course there was quite a mix-up back in 2014 in this regard, meaning that up to half a million EU citizens were prevented from voting, and the Electoral Commission was supposed to have had that sorted out in advance of any further European elections. Given what EU citizens have been put through in the past few years, it is particularly concerning that their voice may not be heard in these elections. It is all very well for the Minister to suggest that they should go home to vote, but, as has been pointed by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), whom I congratulate on securing this urgent question, many of the registers are already closed in other European Union countries, because, unlike ours, their Governments were organised.

May I therefore echo some of the requests made by others and ask, in particular, that the deadline for registration be extended? May I also ask the Minister not to shuffle responsibility off on to the Electoral Commission, but to take Government responsibility for what has happened here and to make sure that the Electoral Commission is indeed writing to all local electoral registration officers and monitoring their compliance with the reminder to send out these forms?

Finally, given that we are in this mess because of the way the Government have handled the Brexit process, will the Minister take some Government responsibility for an information campaign aimed at EU citizens to make sure that they are registered to vote—or are the Government afraid of what these people will vote for if they are registered?

Brandon Lewis: I must say to the hon. and learned Lady that I do not accept the premise of some of her points—in fact, I think they are based on an entirely false premise. First, what she said I said is not what I said. In answer to her final point, which links to that, let me say that over the past year the Government, and indeed the Electoral Commission, have been advising EU residents to register in their member state. That is not the same thing as saying, “Go home and vote.” However, it does fulfil her last request, as we have been advising EU citizens—understandably, as we did not expect to be fighting these elections—that if they wish to exercise their vote, they should register in their home member state, because that is where there would be a European election.

Of course, if the honourable looks back in *Hansard* later, she will see that in my opening remarks I outlined that the Electoral Commission is in contact, and has been in consistent contact, with electoral registration officers about the processes to make sure that things are in place.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): There is of course a really easy solution to all this, isn't there, Minister? Let's just stop mucking about and call the whole thing off.

Brandon Lewis: As my hon. Friend knows well, I often agree with and enjoy his direct, cutting-through remarks, which he has just demonstrated again on the Floor of the House, getting to the core point in such a simple way. I entirely agree with what he said, and I hope that we have a chance for this House to express the will it should have expressed on 29 March, which is to approve the withdrawal agreement, leave the EU and deliver on the referendum result.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Government have a responsibility to encourage the widest possible participation in the European Parliament elections, but the impression they are giving to EU citizens, “Please do not vote here, vote back home.” is doing the opposite and is, frankly, insulting to many of them who regard the UK as their home. The Minister will be aware that some electoral registration officers have sent out reminder letters and UC1 forms to EU citizens. Is it the Government's policy that all EROs should do so, and should do so immediately?

Brandon Lewis: Let me correct something that the right hon. Gentleman said. I have huge respect for him and for his role. The point I have been making about EU citizens voting in their home member states is that because we were not looking to fight European elections as we wanted to leave the EU, the Government's advice over the past year for people who wished to use their vote had been to register in their home state, because that would be the only place where there would be a European election in which they could vote. There is obviously now the potential that we will fight European elections, which is why, as I outlined in my opening remarks, the Electoral Commission has advised the electoral registration officers to identify all EU citizens who have the right to vote and notify them that they can vote in this country. If they complete a UC1, they will be able to register to vote and then vote in the European elections, should we hold them, although obviously as a Government we would rather not hold them.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am fortunate to represent a constituency with at least 7,000 EU citizens, so this issue is particularly important for me. We should continue to communicate on the process. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the registration process is exactly the same as it was last time and that to suggest that there has been some kind of change is more likely to cause confusion than clarity?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I give credit to Opposition Members and am absolutely sure that they are not trying purposely to confuse people, but the processes are exactly the same as they were in 2014 and, as I said, go back to the 2001 regulations.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this urgent question.

I am bound to place on the record the fact that I have profound concerns about the elections, which I hope do take place, and suspect strongly that there will be many legal challenges. I say gently to the Minister that the reason why we are holding them is that the Government have failed to deliver on the referendum result, and I remind him that it is a good job the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) is not present, because if he were here, he might want to remind the

Minister about his elderly parents, who were born in Italy and have lived and contributed here, like many hundreds of thousands of EU citizens. This is their home, and the idea that to exercise their democratic right they should go back to Italy is absolutely outrageous.

I am worried about the rights of European citizens to vote, but I am also worried about their rights to stand. I was going to raise this issue as a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, on the day that the nominations closed in the south-west and Gibraltar—for the rest of the United Kingdom the deadline is 4 o'clock today—I discovered that the Electoral Commission had failed to supply to the returning officers the necessary information for them to provide to an EU citizen who wishes to stand, as they lawfully can, as a candidate in the elections. I am grateful to the returning officers in Kettering, who were so helpful; to the Spanish and Romanian ambassadors, who intervened directly; and to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who intervened directly to provide the material, guidance and advice to the returning officers directly from the Cabinet Office, because the Electoral Commission had failed to do it.

As I stand here today, I cannot say whether two Change UK candidates, one Spanish born and one Romanian born, will be able to stand in the elections, through no fault of their own. Will the Minister please assure the House that any EU citizen who wishes to stand and who satisfies the legal requirements will not be and has not been prevented from standing in the elections?

Brandon Lewis: Let me deal with a couple of the points raised by the right hon. Lady. I reiterate that I personally believe in democracy and think that everybody who is in this country at any election, be it local, European or parliamentary, should look to exercise their right to vote. Many people have given a great deal over decades to have that right to vote, which is why it is important that we are clear with people that, should they complete that UC1 form, they will be able to vote, exactly as in 2014 and previous European elections. My point about people voting in their home member state is that that is what many EU citizens will have already arranged to do, on the understanding that there were not going to be elections in this country.

Where I disagree with the right hon. Lady quite dramatically is that I think this House should be supporting the decision made in the 2016 referendum, voting for the withdrawal agreement and not holding the elections—

Anna Soubry: Answer my question.

Brandon Lewis: I am answering the right hon. Lady's questions. She asked several and I have just covered some of them.

On her final question about EU citizens who wish to stand as candidates in the elections, the rules concerning EU citizens who wish to stand in this country in the European elections in May are the same as they were for the previous election in 2014. There are no changes. The Electoral Commission has provided guidance for candidates on this matter—

Anna Soubry: No it has not.

Brandon Lewis: My understanding from the Electoral Commission is that it has. I hear the right hon. Lady saying that it has not; I will look into that straight after

this urgent question and make sure that somebody in the Cabinet Office, or myself, comes back to her directly during the course of today.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My constituency is home to thousands of EU citizens. They deserve the right to vote here and every effort should be made to ensure that they can do so. Given the Government's Brexit shambles, will the Minister now commit to doing one of several things: extending the deadline, but also ensuring that photocopied or scanned documentation will be accepted when people register?

Brandon Lewis: As I have said at the Dispatch Box a few times, I agree that everybody who is entitled to vote should be encouraged to exercise their vote, which is a treasured and valued thing. I have put a copy of the UC1 form in the Library today, as I have outlined, so Members can see it. It is a very short and simple form to fill in, people have plenty of time to do just that, and I am sure that the Electoral Commission will look at the options that the hon. Lady has outlined.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Minister's answers this morning can hardly be seen as a reassurance that the Government value EU citizens living in this country or respect their rights. The Government should do their utmost to make good on their promises to respect EU citizens' rights, so will the Minister please confirm that, for every EU citizen registered to vote in UK local elections, the obligation to send out the additional form for EU elections rests with the Government? This mess lies clearly at the Government's door, not that of local government officials.

Brandon Lewis: As I said earlier, the UC1 form is there for anybody to complete and send in. It is on the website, it takes about 30 seconds to complete—or maybe a minute, for anybody whose handwriting is as slow as mine—and I hope that as many EU citizens as possible who are able to vote in this country take advantage of that opportunity and use their vote, if we have the elections.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): European Union citizens make a huge contribution to our public services, our economy, our communities and our country, and to my city of Newcastle. I hope that the Minister recognises that and recognises that they have suffered immensely through the Brexit process, not being able to vote in the first place and facing a rise in hate crime and continued uncertainty about their status and that of loved ones. Does he not think that he should go the extra mile to facilitate their voting and that not doing so adds insult to injury and reflects a lack of flexibility of responsiveness, which is the reason why we are in this mess in the first place?

Brandon Lewis: The reason we are in this position is that on 29 March too many Members of Parliament did not vote to leave the European Union. However, I agree with the hon. Lady that EU citizens play a hugely important part in our economy, culture and society. That is why it is important that the Government and the Prime Minister have been clear from the very beginning that we want to protect and secure the rights of EU citizens in the UK. They are a hugely important part of

[*Brandon Lewis*]

our economy and I hope that as many as possible who wish to do so take advantage of the opportunity to vote in the elections, should we hold them. However, I still hold to the point that my main aim is to ensure that we do not have those elections in the first place and that we honour the referendum result.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is deeply depressing to have to reassure EU nationals who come to my surgeries that they are welcome here and that we want to keep them here. It should not be my job to do that, and it is really depressing that people feel so unwelcome, having lived here, worked here and contributed so much for years. The rhetoric sounds reassuring, but the bureaucratic restrictions that the Minister is imposing on EU nationals paint a different picture, so why do we not dispense with this trifling inconvenience and just reassure people that they can vote through the normal process that other British citizens use?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman talks about the normal process. I would point out again that the process is exactly the same as in 2014 and flows from the 2001 regulations. That is how European elections are run, as I outlined in my opening remarks. I hope that European citizens will take the opportunity to look at a UC1 form and, if we hold these elections, register to vote.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The SNP has an EU citizen standing for the European Parliament, Christian Allard, who I am pretty sure considers this place to be his home. He will be voting in the elections, I will be voting for him and I look forward to him taking his seat in the European Parliament. The Minister keeps saying that if this House had voted for the withdrawal agreement, the elections would not be taking place. If EU nationals had had a vote in a referendum, perhaps they would still be taking place. In the contingency planning that the Cabinet ought to be doing for a second EU referendum, will the Government be considering extending the right to vote to EU nationals?

Brandon Lewis: The Government's focus is on doing all we can to ensure that we deliver on and respect the EU referendum—the referendum that we have already had. Parliamentarians should respect and deliver on that before they start talking about any others.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Minister actually answer the question posed by the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone)—that is, if local authorities have to spend more money because of the late notice of the elections going ahead due to the shambles on the Conservative side of this Parliament, will they receive that money back from central Government?

Brandon Lewis: I thought that I had answered the question by making the point that local elections, European elections and general elections follow the same process of financing. Of course, at this stage, we do not actually even know what the full cost of those elections will be; we will not know until afterwards. At this stage, we do not even know exactly how many nominations there will be. We will be liaising with electoral returning officers through the Electoral Commission, as we always do with elections. Given the hon. Lady's remarks, let me say again that we are in this place because on 29 March she and too many colleagues did not vote to leave the EU and avoid these elections.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): Telling EU citizens to go home and vote is an absolute insult. This is their home and none of this shambles is any of their making. Will the Minister give an assurance that no EU citizens who turns up to vote will be turned away as a result of this shambles? Why can these forms and paperwork not be available at the point where they vote?

Brandon Lewis: Nobody is saying to EU citizens what the hon. Lady has just said we are saying. What we are saying is that EU citizens, as per 2014, should follow the process to register to vote so that they can use their vote if we hold these elections. It is about ensuring that people vote once in the European parliamentary elections, if they are held.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Will the Minister ensure that non-digital platforms are also utilised as part of any publicity drive, which he referred to in his opening remarks, to ensure that voters who do not have access to the internet or adequate broadband are fully informed of the process they need to complete ahead of the deadline?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. The Electoral Commission looks at all these things, but I will ensure that it is specifically aware of that matter.

Government Mandate for the NHS

12.1 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the Government's failure to lay before Parliament the NHS mandate for the current financial year.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): I am grateful to have the opportunity to set out the Government's approach to setting a mandate for NHS England for 2019-20. The Government's annual mandate to NHS England for 2019-20 will, for the first time, be a joint document with the annual NHS Improvement remit letter, called an accountability framework. This signals the importance of these two arm's-length bodies working increasingly closely to maximise their collective impact. It will set one-year transitional objectives to allow the NHS time to implement the long-term plan, and it has been developed to meet the needs of patients, families and staff.

We are committed to the NHS and are funding its long-term plan to ensure that it is fit for the future for patients, their families and NHS staff. The accountability framework sets the expectations that will make that long-term plan a reality. The Government have continued to prioritise funding the NHS, with a five-year budget settlement for the NHS announced in summer 2018 that will see the NHS budget rise by £33.9 billion a year by 2023-24.

The funding settlement and the implementation of the long-term plan are not affected in any way by the short delay in the publication of the accountability framework. We are all engaged to ensure that the accountability framework is published and laid as soon as possible, and I and my ministerial colleagues and officials are working closely with NHS England and Healthwatch England, as statutory consultees, to ensure accountability, improvement and progress to deliver world-class care for patients.

Jonathan Ashworth: It is a pleasure to see the Minister of State, as always, but the Secretary of State should be here to defend his failure to produce the NHS mandate. In every previous year, in accordance with section 23 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012—an Act that he supported and voted for despite everyone telling the Government not to support it—the Government have published the NHS mandate before the beginning of the financial year. This mandate outlines the Secretary of State's priorities for the NHS given the financial settlement, yet this is the first time a Secretary of State has failed to lay before Parliament the Government's mandate to the NHS for the forthcoming financial year. Is this a failure of leadership or the latest piece of stealth dismantling of the Health and Social Care Act? If it is the latter, why not just take our advice and bin the whole thing and so end the wasteful contracting, tendering and marketisation it ushered in?

The Minister talks of the 10-year long-term plan, but it is no good his telling us he endorses Simon Steven's vision of the NHS in a decade's time, when Ministers cannot even tell us what they expect the NHS to achieve in a year's time. He boasts of the new revenue funding settlement for the NHS but seemingly has not got a clue

what he wants the NHS to spend it on in the next 12 months, and at the same time he does not talk about the cuts to public health budgets, training budgets and capital investment.

Will the new accountability framework deliver for patients in the next 12 months? Last year's mandate pledged that A&E aggregate performance in England would hit 95% in 2018. That pledge was broken, so can the Minister tell us whether, for those A&E departments not trialling the new access standard, the four-hour A&E standard will be met this year, or will the target not be met for the fourth year running?

Or how about the 18-week referral to treatment target? More than half a million people are now waiting more than 18 weeks for treatment. The target that 92% of people on the waiting list should be waiting less than 18 weeks has not been met since 2016. Will that target be met in the next 12 months, or has it also been abandoned? What about cancer waits? Some 28,000 patients are now waiting beyond two months for treatment. The target for 85% of cancer patients to be seen within two months for their first cancer treatment after an urgent referral has been missed in every month but one since April 2014. Will that target be met this year, or will cancer patients be expected to wait longer and longer?

On staffing and pay, will funding be made available in the next 12 months, as it was last year, for a pay rise for health staff employed on agenda for change terms and conditions working in the public health sector for local authorities and social enterprises?

We have no NHS mandate, even though it is mandatory. We have no social care Green Paper, even though it has been promised five times. The big issue has been ducked again. We have no workforce plan, even though we have 100,000 vacancies across the NHS, and the interim plan, which should have been published today, has been delayed again. The Secretary of State parades his leadership credentials around right-wing think-tanks, yet on this record he could not run a wheel stall, never mind the Tory party. It is clearer than ever that only Labour will fully fund our NHS and deliver the quality of care patients deserve.

Stephen Hammond: Anyone listening to that will have realised that the hon. Gentleman is more concerned with political points scoring and process than with the substance and funding of the NHS. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) shouts at me, but she will want to remember that the shadow Secretary of State welcomed the long-term plan—or much of it—back in January.

It is absolutely clear—evidence was provided to the Public Accounts Select Committee yesterday by the permanent secretary and the chief executive of NHS England—that while obviously it would be better to publish by the deadline, it is more important that the mandate be right than published on a particular day. It is more important that we get this document on the long-term strategy of the NHS correct. As Simon Stevens, the chief executive of the NHS, said, there is no problem with this short delay to the mandate. It is an important document, but it is causing him no problems. It is causing no problems.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned access to treatment and treatment times. This winter, more than 7 million patients were seen in under four hours. That is an

[Stephen Hammond]

increase of nearly 6% in attendances. I would have hoped that the Opposition Front Bench might have praised the NHS and its hard-working staff—

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Always do. I worked in it for 17 years.

Stephen Hammond: Rather than shouting political points across the Dispatch Box.

The hon. Gentleman says there are no targets. He is of course wrong.

Jonathan Ashworth: I said you were not meeting them.

Stephen Hammond: No, the hon. Gentleman said there were no targets likely to be set for the NHS this year. The accountability framework will include detailed and specific annual deliverables and set out in detail a process for delivering future implementation as well as some of the early delivery goals for 2019-20. He is wrong therefore to say that the framework will not have deliverables attached to it. It will. He also mentioned the Green Paper—

Jonathan Ashworth: Where is it?

Stephen Hammond: I have said, as the hon. Gentleman has heard many times, that we are finalising that. Again, it is more important to get it right. On the long-term plan for workforce implementation, a draft plan is being produced and I expect that plan to be published in the very near future—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The shadow Secretary of State exceeded his time on his feet. He must not now chunter in borderline delinquent fashion from his seat.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): He's too old to be a delinquent.

Mr Speaker: No one is ever too old to behave in a delinquent fashion.

Stephen Hammond: There are all sorts of lines I could follow that with, Mr Speaker.

It is clear that it is this side of the House that is putting in the funding to make sure that the NHS can deliver for the patients, staff and families.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Most of us will remember that the NHS Confederation said four years ago that it wanted

“a manageable number of objectives, which...focus on long-term outcomes for patients and populations rather than measures of how services are delivered”—

and—

“encourage collective responsibility for patient outcomes rather than silo working – particularly the expected outcomes from integrated care”.

Most people in the NHS will welcome the short delay if the result is that it makes it more possible for them to achieve the objective of the NHS, which is serving patients together.

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend will have noted, as I said in my opening remarks, that this is an accountability framework because it brings together both the mandate for NHS England and the remit letter to NHS Improvement. It is a sign of more collaborative working which, as he says, almost everybody in the NHS and the healthcare arena would welcome.

Ms Eagle: The Minister will know the funding pressures that the NHS has been under, despite the 10-year plan: we still await the actual money being delivered, even though it has been announced. In the Wirral, a great deal of inefficiency is caused by the chronic underfunding of social care, for which the Government are responsible, which puts enormous pressure on health services. When it finally arrives, will the plan for the next year offer some proper relief in that area?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady will know that the Government have committed £33.9 billion up to 2023-24, and the first element of that has arrived this year. There will be, as I said earlier, publication of a Green Paper on social care and, combined with the comprehensive spending review, that will ensure that the Government will provide for the social care funding that is necessary.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Minister recognise that the commitment under the long-term plan to ambulatory care, which is supported by the Royal College of Physicians, is helping patients receive the best form of care service in their own homes?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. At the heart of the long-term plan is the emphasis on primary care and prevention. Providing care for people in their own homes undoubtedly achieves better outcomes for patients and he is right to welcome it.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The Minister will know that NHS England is currently consulting on proposals to change the law to remove mandatory competition, but billions of pounds' worth of NHS services are currently out to tender. Has he considered, as part of the mandate, issuing clear guidance to CCGs that while the consultation is taking place they do not need to put many services out to the market? Or is he happy for that privatisation to continue on his watch?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that a consultation is being undertaken on various aspects of the long-term plan and the legal framework that needs to be put in place. It is entirely up to local CCGs to make decisions on their procurement policy.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Record investment is going into Kettering General Hospital and a record number of patients are being treated, but the best way that the Minister can deliver the NHS mandate and long-term plan for the people of Kettering is by providing the funding for a new urgent care hub, the site of which he has visited at Kettering General Hospital, and by working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to take advantage of local government reorganisation in Northamptonshire to create a health and social care pilot. Will he commit to both?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend and I have sometimes disagreed on certain things, but one thing we agree on is his advocacy for his constituents, and he is right that I have been to see for myself the issues in Kettering in terms of the current configuration of the accident and emergency department. He is right to press for that urgent care centre, and he knows that he has impressed the case on my mind.

Mr Speaker: Everybody in Kettering must be aware of the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone). It is beyond my vivid imagination to suppose that there is any resident of the area who is not aware of him.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): The truth is that it is very difficult for the NHS to make plans without knowing what the Government's plans are for social care. We know, following a response to a question in yesterday's debate, that the Green Paper has actually been written. There is simply no excuse for the continued delay in its publication which would allow the House to scrutinise it and the NHS to be able to provide a truly integrated approach to health and social care. Just saying that it will be published soon is no longer acceptable. Will the Minister set out when we can expect to see this vital document, so that we can scrutinise the Government's plans?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady knows that the House and her Committee will have the fullest opportunity to scrutinise the document as and when it is published. She also knows that there is a commitment to publish it soon. She also rightly points out that it will deliver on the need to ensure that health and social care are integrated.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): For most of my professional life, I was an NHS planner. I assure the Minister that the great expectation and anticipation of NHS planners for planning guidance in the mandate is very real. They are public servants who expect to be held accountable and do what the Government ask them to do. It is unacceptable to leave them in the dark. It is an insult to patients—taxpayers who pay for services and expect to know what they can receive locally. The delay is inexcusable.

The Minister says he has a plan and the Government say they have the money, so why cannot they publish it? What are they trying to hide?

Stephen Hammond: The Government are not trying to hide anything. The hon. Lady is right that it is an important document, and it is important therefore that we get it absolutely correct. I refer her to what the chief executive of NHS England said yesterday. He said:

“We have an agreed direction in the long-term plan... We have the budget set for the next year, and we have the NHS annual planning process... wrapped up... 2019-20 is... a transition year... stepping into the new five-year long-term plan.”

The chief executive of the NHS thinks that the process is working acceptably.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am really not following the Minister on why this mandate has not been published. I wonder whether it is because of the paralysis in Government caused by the Brexit shambles or because, as the *Health Service Journal* reports, the Secretary of State is focused on an anticipated leadership race and his thoughts are elsewhere.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady does a great injustice to my right hon. Friend. He is today—

Paula Sherriff: Writing his speech for the leadership!

Stephen Hammond: In the hon. Lady's fantasy world, that may be true, but my right hon. Friend is in fact addressing a conference in Manchester, talking about the gender pay gap and how this side will close it in the NHS. I would have thought she would welcome that, rather than shouting at me.

Dr Wollaston: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When the Secretary of State comes to the Dispatch Box and makes a clear commitment that the publication date of the Green Paper will be before Christmas, and we know that the document has been written, what are the consequences of an absolute failure to honour such a commitment made at the Dispatch Box by a Secretary of State?

Mr Speaker: The consequences are political more than anything else. Quite what form that political consequence takes, if there is to be any, very much depends upon the view of the House of Commons; so the matter is the property of the House. I do not wish to incite strong feeling on this matter and the Minister has answered questions fully—whether to the hon. Lady's satisfaction or not is another matter—and courteously. There are proceedings that can be brought to the House, but those are rarely brought and they would require a written communication with me. If, for example, a Member thought that the behaviour were contemptuous of the House, it is perfectly proper to bring that to my attention and I would have to consider it very carefully. But my instinctive reaction is that the consequence is a political consequence in terms of what might be considered a negative opinion of the failure to honour an earlier commitment. We shall leave it there for now.

Business of the House

12.20 pm

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 the week commencing 29 April will be:

MONDAY 29 APRIL—A motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Chemical Weapons (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 618), followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Zimbabwe (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 604), followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Republic of Belarus (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 600), followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Syria (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 792), followed by a motion relating to the membership of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

TUESDAY 30 APRIL—Second Reading of the National Insurance Contributions (Termination Payments and Sporting Testimonials) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 1 MAY—Opposition day (19th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 2 MAY—A general debate on World Immunisation Week.

FRIDAY 3 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

I welcome all staff and Members of this House back to Parliament after Easter. First, I want to echo the sentiment expressed yesterday at Prime Minister's questions by paying tribute to Lyra McKee. We send our deepest sympathies to her friends and family, and in this House we will always stand against those who committed such a horrendous act.

The whole House was shocked and appalled at the attacks on three Christian churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday. We send our deepest condolences to all those who have lost loved ones and who have been affected by that atrocity.

This month is Bowel Cancer Awareness Month, a valuable opportunity to raise funds and awareness for the millions of people who are affected by this terrible disease, and to help ensure a future when nobody needs to die of bowel cancer.

Finally, I wish all those standing in next week's local elections all the best for the final week of campaigning. We should continue to encourage anyone with an interest in serving their community to stand for election, we should do everything to encourage anyone with an interest in serving their community to stand for election, and we should do everything possible to protect our democracy from unacceptable abuse and intimidation.

I finish by paying tribute to all those who are willing to put themselves forward for public service.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, and for our second Opposition day. We ask for one and two come along—a bit like buses, which is quite interesting because the Labour party

is announcing £1.3 billion-worth of investment to reverse the Government cuts to 3,000 bus routes. That is a lifeline to our pensioners.

It was the Prime Minister herself who announced a two-year parliamentary Session, in mid-June 2017, just after the election. We know that there is not a fixed length of time for Sessions, and that it is usual for the first Session after an election to go to 18 months, but there is correspondence circulating—I say circulating, rather than leaked—which shows that, as I understand it, Whitehall has been told to work towards a new parliamentary Session starting in or around June 2019. What is the Government line on when this Session will end and the new one will begin, because important Bills—the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill, the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill—all need their Report stage?

I have previously raised at business questions the issue of the 17,000 British students who had planned to study in Europe under Erasmus+ from September. The Leader of the House did not respond to that query, so our young people need to know whether their funding is secured. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or for Exiting the European Union—I do not mind which—ensuring that that funding is guaranteed? That is why we need a Queen's Speech.

In our Queen's Speech, we would deal with the climate emergency. It was a Labour Government who passed the world's first Climate Change Act in 2008, and we are the leading country working to achieve the agreements from Kyoto. The Government's response so far is to expand Heathrow airport and facilitate fracking, and they have a 25-year environment plan—and no statement on a scrappage scheme for diesel cars. By the end of that plan, Greta, who spoke so movingly to all of us, will be 41 years old. I do not think that is what she had in mind when she spoke of the climate emergency.

We need a Queen's Speech because we need to stop the Department for Work and Pensions' failing system of assessments. I ask this again, following the tragic death of Stephen Smith, who had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, osteoarthritis and an enlarged prostate that left him in chronic pain, but was deemed fit to work by the DWP. No one should be fighting the DWP from their sickbed.

The Leader of the House is right: our democracy is under threat. At the first meeting of the new Sub-Committee on Disinformation, the Information Commissioner said that she was "surprised and disappointed" by the lack of space given to the regulation of online political campaigns in the Government's recent Online Harms White Paper, saying that there should be more focus on what she called a "huge societal harm". The Information Commissioner said that a million people clicked on Facebook adverts paid for by Mainstream Network, with an unknown number going on to email their MP to urge them to reject the Prime Minister's plans for a Brexit deal. The emails of over a million people who responded to that campaign for a hard Brexit may have been collected.

If we cannot have a Queen's Speech, could we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on how the Government will regulate online political campaigns? Otherwise, we are in danger of electing a comedian, as they have done in Ukraine.

More important, could we have a debate on early-day motion 2309 on Donald Trump's proposed state visit, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)?

[That this House deplores the record of US President Donald Trump, including his misogyny, racism and xenophobia; condemns his previous comments on women, refugees and torture; further condemns his lack of action on climate change and failure to support the Paris Climate Change Deal; further deplores his sharing of online content related to a far-right extremist organisation in the UK; deprecates his comments about the Mayor of London; notes previous motions and debates in the House including on the withholding of the honour of a joint address to the Houses of Parliament; further notes the historical significance and honour that comes with the choice to offer a full state visit to an individual; and calls on the Prime Minister and the Government to rescind the advice to offer a full state visit to President Trump.]

The President, who is entitled to come here on any other visit but not in our name, has spearheaded a dangerous policy of separating migrant children from their families and of banning Muslims from the USA; suggested today that GCHQ spied on his election campaign; referred to nations as “Sh**hole countries”; and called news outlets “fake news” in an attempt to limit the freedom of the press. The report by the Special Counsel says that he has obstructed justice. At least the EDM was transparent and not redacted.

Will the Leader of the House look into something that a colleague has raised and issue some guidance for what colleagues do outside each other's houses? They should not be tweeting outside people's homes; that is not acceptable to their families. I will give her the name of the hon. Member later.

Whether it is 359 people, including 48 children, or Lyra McKee, life has needlessly been taken away. As Lyra's family have said:

“Lyra's answer would have been simple, the only way to overcome hatred and intolerance is with love, understanding and kindness.”

Murdered on Holy Thursday, she will forever be linked to peace and the Good Friday agreement.

Our thoughts are with the families in Sri Lanka who have been destroyed forever by these events: innocent people enjoying their lives or—as Lyra was—a journalist doing her work. It is our duty and our responsibility to them, as Father Magill said, to work for peace.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the shadow Leader of the House for her remarks about Lyra McKee. It was a fitting tribute that all Members would agree with.

The hon. Lady asked when this parliamentary Session will end. As ever, it is subject to the progress of parliamentary business, and an announcement will be made in the usual way at the appropriate moment.

The hon. learned asked about Erasmus+. She will be aware that, while we remain a member of the European Union, students will continue to be part of the Erasmus arrangements. Under the withdrawal agreement and future economic partnership with the EU, new arrangements will be put in place, but it is this Government's ambition to seize many new opportunities for young people to study overseas and form links around the world. We have Education questions on Monday 29 April, and she may wish to raise her specific question then.

The hon. Lady asked about climate change and the climate crisis. I would like to pay tribute to all those who have done so much to peacefully share their views about the importance of addressing climate change. She will be aware that it was this Government who ratified the Paris agreement in November 2016. I was proud to be part of that team when I was Energy Minister at the Department of Energy and Climate Change. It was the first truly global legally binding agreement to tackle climate change, and I know that all Members support it.

In the UK, we have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 25% since 2010, and UK carbon dioxide emissions have fallen for six years in a row—the longest streak on record. The hon. Lady is right to mention our 25-year environment plan, which pledges to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste. I banned plastic microbeads in cosmetics and personal care products. It is important that we do everything we can to protect our marine environment. Air pollution has also been reduced significantly since 2010, and we have put in place a clean air strategy and a clean growth strategy, both of which aim to ensure that we lead the world in decarbonisation—something that matters a great deal to all of us.

The hon. Lady raised the tragic case of Stephen Smith. I have seen on social media that his was a most appalling situation. I am not aware of the exact circumstances surrounding his tragic death, but it was a very harrowing story. The Government spend £55 billion a year to support disabled people and people with health conditions, which is up £10 billion in real terms since 2010, and we do everything in our power to ensure that we prioritise the wellbeing of people with disabilities.

The hon. Lady also asked about online harms and in particular what we can do to ensure proper protection of people's data and protection from the abuse that we see all too often. She will be aware that the Online Harms White Paper sets out our plans for world-leading legislation to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online, overseen by an independent regulator, and we will make a further announcement on that in due course.

Finally, the hon. Lady mentioned the state visit from the President of the United States. All Members will be aware that the UK has a special and enduring relationship with the United States, based on our long history and commitment to shared values. The upcoming visit will be an opportunity to strengthen our already close relationship—one based on a frank exchange of views and, where we disagree, making our disagreements frankly known. It will also be an opportunity to discuss how we can build on our close ties with the United States in the years ahead.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I chair the all-party parliamentary group on building communities, and on Tuesday we launched our inquiry into how we can build not only more housing units in this country but the infrastructure to make homes fit to live in, so that we build communities rather than just empty shells. May we have a debate in Government time on how to change this country's infrastructure to encourage the building of communities, rather than just putting up houses that are soulless and that people do not want to live in?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We are trying not only to build houses—that is a top domestic priority for the Government, to

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

ensure that everybody has a safe and secure home of their own—but to ensure that they are in proper communities with the right level of infrastructure. I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall or Backbench debate, so that all Members can share their experiences and views.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, and I echo the tributes to Lyra McKee and the victims of the appalling slaughter in Sri Lanka.

It is good to be back, but it almost feels as though we have not been away at all. We have still not left the EU, surprise, surprise. The Prime Minister is still in office—just—and we are still all looking forward to the European elections, which I know Government Members are looking forward to as much as we in Scotland are looking forward to Prime Minister Boris. Can we have a debate on why the good citizens of the United Kingdom should get out there and exercise their right to vote in those crucial elections? There is such a variety of choice. They could choose, like 40% of Conservative councillors, to vote for the Farage vanity party or the Kippers. They could vote for leave Labour or remain Labour, or some combination of the two. And then there are the Change UK TIGgers. The wonderful thing about them is that, thankfully, they are the only ones. Can we have a debate about that, to get some excitement into the European elections?

The only item of business that the Government want is another shot at their thrice-defeated withdrawal agreement. According to our friends in the press, that might happen as soon as next week. Apparently, the talks with Labour are going both disastrously and really well, according to who we speak to and what time of the day it is. Can the Leader of the House furnish us with her thinking on the withdrawal agreement, when we might expect to see it back and whether it meets the strictures laid down by you, Mr Speaker?

Lastly, we on the SNP Benches might not be sticking around here for much longer. Scotland is looking at this Brexit freak show and increasingly saying, “Naw, no thank you.” Imagine being in Scotland and thinking that the isolating ugliness of this disastrous Brexit is the best that Scotland could ever be or aspire to. That is why there will be another referendum on our independence, and Scotland will be saying, “It’s been good to know you, but we think we’ll manage on our own, thank you very much.”

Andrea Leadsom: Well, obviously, we would miss our resident rock star, should the hon. Gentleman choose to leave us, but I can safely say that we will not miss his terrible jokes. As for him saying that the TIGgers are the only ones, I do not think that that is their aspiration. They hope to grow in number, and I am not sure whether he wishes them success or disaster; we will see.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the European elections. He will be aware that the Commons rejection of the withdrawal agreement on 29 March is the reason why we now face European elections. We in the Government have explored every avenue to find ways to avoid fighting the European parliamentary elections. After all, a majority of people in the United Kingdom chose to leave the

European Union. It is absolutely unacceptable that, three years on, we face the need to fight European elections because this House has not found it in its heart to allow us to fulfil the will of the people. That is a great shame, and I am personally extremely upset about it. It is vital that we bring in the withdrawal agreement Bill, to give the House the opportunity to make progress on delivering on the will of the people.

Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman, as he so often does, shows his determination to ignore the result of not only the referendum of 2016 but the referendum of 2014. His party is determined to ask people the question again because it did not like the answer, and that is not the way for a proper democracy in the western world to go about its business.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. A further 33 Members are seeking to catch my eye, and as colleagues know, it is my usual practice to seek to accommodate everybody. However, I have a responsibility to protect the Backbench Business Committee debates as well, and I must advise the House that the first of those two debates, on school funding, has no fewer than 23 would-be contributors. I cannot guarantee that everybody will be called, and there is a premium upon extreme brevity from now on.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on clinical commissioning groups restricting access to treatments formally approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, NHS England and other health authorities? I was shocked to learn that Southend CCG is restricting cataract, hernia and knee and hip replacement operations by putting them on a list of procedures of limited proven value.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry to hear of this situation, but as my hon. Friend will know, blanket restrictions on effective treatments are unacceptable. NHS England should take action if there is evidence of rationing of care, and if the CCG is breaching its statutory responsibility to provide services to the local population. He may like to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise this matter directly with a Health Minister.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the brave firefighters and emergency workers who have been dealing with the fires on Ilkley moor and other moors nearby? They are overstretched, and working hard in extremely difficult conditions to bring these damaging and dangerous fires under control. May we have a debate on properly funding our fire services and, crucially, on the importance of informing the public about fire prevention?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Lady in thanking and paying tribute to all those firefighters working so hard to put out wildfires, which are a problem right across the UK. She is right that we should do everything possible to ensure the public are aware of the risk of these wildfires, and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On 11 April, the statutory instrument was tabled to extend the period before we leave the European Union to 31 October, and it was rushed through this House during the afternoon

following the Council meeting attended by the Prime Minister. Eighty Members of Parliament have signed my prayer for the annulment of that statutory instrument, which we regard as ultra vires and void. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that there is very soon a debate on that statutory instrument and, naturally, on the issues at stake? We believe that that debate should be held on the Floor of the House.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that rejecting this SI would not change exit day as set out in international law, but instead create legal chaos as our domestic statute book would not reflect our current status with the EU. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend has made representations for a debate on this subject, and I am pleased to be able to tell him that I will be able to grant a debate on this statutory instrument in due course.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I, too, welcome the return of Opposition days to the Order Paper, although it would be even more welcome if the Government started to pay some heed to what the House says on these occasions. However, may I say to the Leader of the House that there is now a multiplicity of voices on the Opposition Benches? We have a Member of Parliament elected to represent the interests of the Green party; we have a number of non-aligned Members of Parliament; and the Independent Group is now constituted formally as a political party. In the interests of all voices being heard, the Independent Group Members in particular should be entitled to time, and I very much look forward to pursuing matters of common interest to my party and theirs if they were to get it.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, which I will take away and consider carefully. I am grateful to him for raising this point. This gives me an opportunity to raise one other issue he mentioned, which is whether the Government choose to vote on any Opposition day. Hon. Members will be aware that that is decided on a case-by-case basis, and they will also be aware that Standing Orders are very clear that there is no requirement on any Member of Parliament to vote on any motion.

What I can inform the House of—this may be of help to the House—is my response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's recent report on resolutions of the House of Commons. I have set out a motion under which, if an Opposition party motion is approved by the House, the relevant Minister will respond to that resolution of the House by making a statement no more than 12 weeks after the debate. I have now shortened that to eight weeks after the debate, which I hope will give Members the opportunity to hear a faster statement by the Government on what action we plan to take, while still allowing proper time for consideration of the resolution passed by the House.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): When the French potentate Napoleon described our kingdom as “a nation of shopkeepers”, doubtless he had in mind the panoply of family grocers, butchers and bakers that once populated almost every part of our isles. Now, sadly, they are too often replaced by monolithic superstores or identikit high streets dominated by a handful of soulless supermarkets. Given that the Competition and Markets Authority has today ruled

out the amalgamation of two of these greedy giants, will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in this House on how the Government can stand up for the independent, family-run small businesses that our constituents enjoy, and against the cold-hearted, capricious corporate conglomerates that crush competition and curtail the quality of life of our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: Fantastic—and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. Of course, he is absolutely right that we want thriving high streets. Britain's retailers are a crucial part of our economy, supporting over 3 million jobs and contributing over £90 billion to our economy. The Competition and Markets Authority is independent, and it has made its assessment. People have different views on that, but my right hon. Friend makes a good case for a debate on what more we can do to support our high streets, and I recommend that he go to the Backbench Business Committee to seek such a debate.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Please can we have a debate on the Government's EU settlement scheme? I know constituents who are struggling with the online process, and people who have been here for many years are finding it difficult to supply the documents. We still have no news from the Government about when there may be funding for support services in the community. The Government need to get this right quickly.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. In fact, the EU settlement scheme is being well used. As I understand it, several hundred thousand settlement arrangements have already been agreed. I am sure the Government will be very keen to hear feedback on any areas of concern for right hon. and hon. Members. I suggest that this is raised at the next Exiting the European Union questions, so that she can raise this issue directly with Ministers.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is just a matter of fact that the United Kingdom would have left the European Union either on 29 March or on 12 April except for the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister alone, going to Brussels and asking for an extension, so to say that the reason there are European elections is down to not passing the Government's atrocious withdrawal Bill is wrong. Will the Leader of the House make that point clear, and will she also confirm that we will not only debate what my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has suggested, but vote on it?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is very well aware that it is the Government's policy to leave the European Union in an orderly way, and that means leaving with a deal. He will also be aware that the decision of this House not to support that deal, and indeed to require an extension to article 50, is the reason why such an extension has been agreed. I have made it clear to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) that we will be able to grant a debate on the statutory instrument he has prayed against.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Over the bank holiday period, there were two major moorland fires close to my constituency and one major fire in my constituency. One heroic firefighter took to social media to air his concerns, saying that despite their best efforts, mother

[Paula Sherriff]

nature had beaten them. He had begged for further resources and was told that none was available. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), may we have an urgent debate in Government time to discuss the resources available to our beleaguered fire services?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I pay tribute to the amazing work of firefighters. Particularly at this time of year and as we get to the summer, moorland fires and forest fires are a real problem and a challenge for them. I encourage the hon. Lady to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that she can raise her concern about resources directly with a Minister.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Given the enormous environmental concerns, may we have a debate in Government time about the enormous success of Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council's recycling and rubbish collection services? It would focus on four specific issues: the amazing combined dry recycling bin service introduced last year; the green waste collection service for 30,000 households; the total fleet replacement; and the additional vehicle for the commercial collection service. Does the Leader of the House realise that this Conservative-controlled council is one of the leading councils in the midlands, and will she look kindly on my request for a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend my hon. Friend for raising that issue and I pay tribute to the impressive performance of his excellent Conservative Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council. We are committed to increasing the quality and quantity of recycling and to ensuring that it is easier for everyone. Local authorities play a vital role in waste collection and recycling and we are consulting on how we can help them to improve services. That consultation closes on 13 May, which is in fact my birthday.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Following the Windrush scandal, my constituent was plunged into financial difficulties. He was unable to see his father before he died because he could not afford the return flight to Barbados. He spent the last of his money on a one-way ticket to attend the funeral, but he is now stranded there. His request for an exceptional payment has rolled on for months while he has been plunged into poverty. May we have a debate in Government time about the effectiveness of the compensation scheme for Windrush victims?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear about the situation of the hon. Lady's constituent. As she will know, Ministers have apologised for the mistakes that were made. Windrush citizens are British and deserve to be treated as such, and a dedicated taskforce set up to handle those cases has so far helped more than 2,400 people to get the documentation they need. She will be aware that there is also a compensation scheme and, if she wants to write to me following business questions, I will raise her particular issue directly with Ministers.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate about equipping young people for the world of work? This evening, I will be joining graduates and supporters

of Career Ready in Moray to celebrate their achievements over the last year. They include a national winner, Lee Scott from Keith Grammar School, who was engineering student of the year. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating everyone involved with the Moray Career Ready programme on what it does for young people and the businesses involved?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Lee and all those involved with the Moray Career Ready programme. Preparing students for adult life is one of the Government's top priorities. The Careers and Enterprise Company, which has provided funding to Career Ready, links employers with schools and colleges and improves opportunities for young people to learn about the world of work. I congratulate everyone involved and wish them an enjoyable evening to celebrate their achievements.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on foodbanks? Today, the Trussell Trust announced that Wales has received more than 100,000 referrals to foodbanks over the last year and there has been a 43% rise in food parcels in the last five years. A third of all referrals have been down to benefit payments coming in late, and 51% of all referrals were made because of a delay in the payment of benefits linked to universal credit. Most concerning, a spokesperson from the Department for Work and Pensions said that it is a challenge and that it is not correct to link the rise in foodbanks to the roll-out of universal credit. However, the Work and Pensions Secretary stood at the Dispatch Box and said that there is a link. May we have a statement or debate about that, and will the DWP clarify what is causing that rise in referrals, as the Department's spokespeople clearly do not agree with the Secretary of State?

Andrea Leadsom: Foodbanks represent an impressive response by civil society and faith groups to supporting vulnerable people and we should thank them for all they do. The hon. Gentleman is making a serious point about the Trussell Trust report. The previous Government did not allow jobcentres to point people towards foodbanks but, since 2010, the Government have encouraged people and signposted them so that they can seek help. Universal credit is a far simpler measure to provide people with support to get into work, and some of the work in the Trussell Trust report predates changes that have been made to universal credit to ensure that people can get a whole month of payments upfront and do not need to wait. There are also measures to introduce a two-week overlap of housing benefit payments to ensure that people do not have to wait for money. I believe that the situation he describes has been significantly improved by measures that have already been taken to tighten up payments for universal credit.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Despite Scotland's NHS, schools and transport system failing, the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, announced yesterday that she will push ahead with a second referendum to break up the United Kingdom. May we have a debate to discuss the need to respect the results of referendums? Will the Leader of the House join me in reminding the leader of the SNP in Scotland that Scotland voted to remain part of the

United Kingdom and does not want another divisive referendum? Nicola Sturgeon should get on with her day job.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It is extraordinary that, although there was a referendum only in 2014, with an overwhelming majority for Scotland to remain part of the United Kingdom, rather than focusing on improving Scotland's economy and schools, the Scottish nationalists are determined to ask people again because they did not get the result they wanted. We urge the Scottish nationalists to focus on delivering for the people of Scotland. May I also wish my hon. Friend the best of success in running the London marathon this weekend?

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Paul Williams—another very fit fellow.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I am also running the London marathon this weekend, Mr Speaker. Residents and businesses in Thornaby in my constituency are becoming increasingly concerned about rising levels of antisocial behaviour. They see people on the street acting with impunity because the police simply do not have the resources adequately to police the area. I know that tackling ASB involves more than just police, but the community I represent does not feel safe and needs serious Government action. Can the Leader of the House help me to get it?

Andrea Leadsom: I also wish the hon. Gentleman every success in running the London marathon. I think 16 Members are tackling it, so good luck to all of them. Perhaps they could carry me and I could join in. I certainly could not run it, but I wish them great success.

The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point about antisocial behaviour and the appalling impact it has on communities. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss what more can be done to address the concerns in his community directly with Ministers.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Neighbourhood plans have been around for a long time—indeed, since I helped to invent them in 2011—so may we have a debate to discuss what they have been able to achieve for communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad my hon. Friend reminds us that he was instrumental in writing those local plans. In my constituency, local people have very much welcomed the opportunity to determine what happens, and where and how new development takes place. That is crucial if we are to meet our ambition of ensuring that everybody has a safe and secure home of their own. I encourage him to seek a Backbench Business Committee debate so that all hon. Members can share their views and experiences.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I thought I would start by asking a question that was sent to me on Twitter by @Bravespace3:

“Where is @edwardtimpson review on school exclusions which was supposed to be released last autumn? It could help @sajidjavid understand that a #publichealth approach to violence is about more than blaming overworked professionals. @vickyfoxcroft do you know when it's published?”

Well, @Bravespace3, I have asked eight times and I am really hoping that the Leader of the House will update us today.

Andrea Leadsom: As I said to the hon. Lady last week, my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards would be delighted to meet her to discuss that issue. I hope she has taken him up on that offer.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Sixteen more colleagues wish to contribute, and I would like to move on no later than 1.15 pm. Let us see what we can do.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It has been many weeks since the Prime Minister's knife crime summit and in the meantime the wave of violence and knife crime continues to sweep London and other parts of Britain. Last night there was a double stabbing in my constituency, close to my office. When will the Home Secretary come to the Chamber, report on the summit and outline his plans?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the latest stabbings in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and I know he has raised this issue in the Chamber on a number of occasions. He will be aware that the Government take this issue incredibly seriously. We have announced up to £970 million extra investment in the policing system for next year, as well as in the spring statement £100 million of immediate funding to enable police and crime commissioners to put further police officers on the streets to try to tackle the immediate problems. However, this is a much bigger issue than that. Our Offensive Weapons Bill has brought forward the means to restrict the sale of knives online and the introduction of knife crime prevention orders, and our £200 million youth endowment fund seeks to get young people away from being tempted into a life of knife crime and serious violence.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), I think everybody is asking, “Where is the Home Secretary with respect to knife crime?” The Leader of the House has said week after week that she is asking him to come to make a statement. He obviously got confused because he did make a statement on knife crime but not to the House of Commons; on 16 April, I think, he announced all sorts of policies to tackle this. Only today, we see why Member after Member raises this issue. The Office for National Statistics published figures today that show homicides at record levels and that knife crime offences are at the highest they have been since records began—and the Home Secretary does not appear at the Dispatch Box. Will she go back again and ask him where he is?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have had a number of debates, urgent questions and statements in recent months on serious violence. The Prime Minister has held a summit to try to tackle this very serious issue, looking at how we can bring in all stakeholders in the NHS, education and different local government services. In addition, the Government are investing significant sums in community schemes

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

that are trying to get young people away from gang crime and knife crime. The Government are doing everything in their power to tackle this appalling issue, but I have taken away his concerns and raised with the Home Office the desire of many hon. Members for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to come to the House to make a further statement.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Largs foodbank in my constituency has experienced significantly increased usage since November 2018: an increase of between 200% and 300% on the same period in the previous year. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her concerns that too many people are struggling to put food on the table? In-work poverty is a disgrace and we need to do more to ensure that everyone has enough to eat.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that, in this country, nobody should go hungry. The Government have invested significant time, energy, effort and money into ensuring that universal credit replaces an old system where many people did not get the benefits they were entitled to because the system was so complicated. The new system of universal credit helps people into work and supports them to meet their own needs for as long a time as necessary while they find work for themselves and their families.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): This Sunday, 28 April, marks International Workers' Memorial Day, supported by the trade unions. Many trade union councils up and down the country will be holding events. What are the Government doing to remember the dead and to fight for the living, and to remember the workers who have died at work?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. It is vital that we remember all those who have lost their lives through work, sometimes through negligence but often through accidents and so on. He may wish to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can put on the record his views and some of the reminiscences and memories of those who have lost loved ones.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): May I echo the calls for a debate on the EU settlement scheme? I have a Spanish constituent who has made her home here for 46 years, but it seems that because she registered in the 1970s for indefinite leave she is being told she has to apply for a biometric permit rather than the settlement scheme. That is costing her time, money and unnecessary stress. When can a Minister come to the House to explain why EU citizens still seem to be experiencing a hostile environment?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the EU settlement scheme is being well used. It has been well established and the feedback seems to be generally positive. I am very happy, as always, to take up a specific issue on his behalf, if he would like to write to me after business questions. If it is a more general concern that he wants to raise, perhaps he could bring it up with Exiting the European Union Ministers at the next oral questions.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thank goodness the fire at Notre Dame led to no loss of life, but if we were to have a fire in this building, parts of which are considerably older than Notre Dame, we might not be so lucky because there are 9,000 people who work here every day. Is it not time that we use this as a wake-up call? I know the Leader of the House agrees with me, but will she put on her hobnail boots, storm over to Downing Street, stamp her feet and force the Prime Minister to bring forward the parliamentary buildings Bill as fast as possible? We cannot have the French rebuild Notre Dame in five years and us still thinking about leaving 10 years later.

Andrea Leadsom: I am extremely sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman's request. He might find traces of my hobnail boots on their way over to No. 10 over the past week or so. That prospect was not lost on me either. I was so sorry to see the terrible fire at Notre Dame. It was an absolute tragedy for the world. He is of course absolutely right that we have to ensure that we do everything possible to bring forward our own restoration and renewal Bill as soon as possible. Watch this space.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The only 24-hour ATM in Ferguslie Park in my constituency charges 95 pence per withdrawal. The ATM is outside LINK's financial inclusion subsidy criteria, despite Ferguslie Park being the most deprived area in Scotland. May we have a debate on ATM charges and fair access to cash?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning issue. I must admit that I had understood that most ATMs in deprived areas were now required not to charge for services. I recommend that he raises his particular question at Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on Tuesday 30 April directly with Ministers.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Trussell Trust army of volunteers were shamefully forced to provide 1.6 million packages of support last year, including for 600,000 children. Southwark saw an extra 1,000 people, a rise of 25%, including for many with persistent universal credit problems. When will the Government allow time to debate the grotesque reliance on food banks that Ministers have created since 2010?

Andrea Leadsom: I just do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's assessment. In fact, while it is absolutely unacceptable that people have to go hungry at any time, the Government's policy has been to introduce universal credit as a means to help people. Some 2.4 million households will be better off as a result of changes we made at Budget. We always provide a strong safety net through the welfare system for those who need extra support. What is absolutely vital is that universal credit itself is a much simpler system that is enabling people, who previously were losing through the complexity of the many different facets of the old welfare system, to get the money they are entitled to. That is absolutely vital.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), Change UK is now a political party and we have 11 Members. Together

we certainly are, I would suggest, entitled to an Opposition day debate and we would like to have it on the people's vote. I and others would be very happy to meet the Leader to discuss how we can ensure we now have Opposition day debates that reflect the real representation across the Chamber.

Andrea Leadsom: I am always happy to meet right hon. and hon. Members who want to propose procedural changes and that would be the case in the right hon. Lady's situation.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Can I say to the Government that there is a crime crisis in this country? In Greater Manchester, it is evident to every single person who lives in our community. Every single day, 600 crimes in Greater Manchester are not even investigated because the police do not, after a cut of £183 million a year, have the resources to deal with them. We are now at the stage where local communities are actively pursuing setting up private security companies to police our communities. How can that be right and fair, and what does it do for the future of policing in this country?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point. It is absolutely right that we do everything we can to ensure we keep our communities safe. That is why the Government have provided an extra £970 million of investment in the policing system next year. It is the case that the Opposition voted against that. They need to answer the question as to why they did that. It is vital that police and crime commissioners have the resources they need to deal not only with the problems of serious violence and knife crime, but the rising levels of cyber-crime, drug-related crime and so on. That is why the Government have prioritised extra resources for the police system.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A report produced recently by Christian Solidarity Worldwide states that in certain parts of Mexico, members of religious minority groups are often pressured by local authorities either to convert to the majority faith or to participate in activities such as religious festivals that are linked to the majority faith. If they refuse, local leaders often strip them of basic services such as education by barring their children from school. In extreme cases, discrimination results in forced displacement, and children are left fully deprived of their right to education. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this important matter?

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, the hon. Gentleman has raised a very important point. We are committed to freedom of religious belief, and are very concerned about the severity and scale of violations of that freedom of belief in many parts of the world.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, on 4 July 2018 the Prime Minister announced that Lord Ahmad would be the special envoy on freedom of religious belief, and on 26 December the Foreign Secretary announced an independent review of the persecution of Christians. The review will be conducted by the Bishop of Truro, and will make recommendations on additional practical steps that the Foreign Office can take to support persecuted Christians. The bishop will publish a report by the summer.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): On Tuesday I will launch an all-party parliamentary group on towing and trailer safety, following the tragic death of a toddler in my constituency in 2014. I am grateful for the Government's support for the work that I have been doing on trailer safety, and for the support of Members on both sides of the House for the APPG. May I ask the Leader of the House to support the work that we all try to do in APPGs as a good way of highlighting safety issues that are vital to our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to commend and pay tribute to all APPGs, and in particular the one on trailer safety to which the hon. Lady has referred. Issues that crop up in our own constituencies—often, unfortunately, as a result of tragedies involving our constituents—can lead to real change.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am proud that so many of my fellow residents and friends have been in London with Extinction Rebellion, although I shall welcome them back home after today. Given the words of Greta Thunberg—and, more particularly in my case, Polly Higgins, the great campaigner for a law on ecocide who sadly died earlier this week—will the Government now introduce their environment Bill? We do not seem to be doing much else at the moment, and saving the planet from climate change is one valuable thing that they could seek to do.

Andrea Leadsom: We certainly share a passionate desire to tackle the issue of global climate change and protect our planet for future generations. We understand the concerns of those who are protesting, but we are interested in solutions, not disruption.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we are working hard on what is the first environment Bill in over 20 years, but that is not the only thing we are doing to improve our contribution to reducing global emissions. As I said earlier, we have reduced greenhouse gas emissions in this country by 25% since 2010, and air pollution has been reduced significantly since then. Emissions of toxic nitrogen oxides have fallen by 29%, and are at their lowest level since records began. There is more to do, but a great deal is already being achieved.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The fabulous Etape Loch Ness event will take place this Sunday, when nearly 6,000 people will get on their bikes and cycle around Loch Ness. May we have a debate in Government time on how to encourage more cycling across the board and, in particular, how to learn from the successful outcome in Scotland, where, for example, a Sustrans project has led to a 300% increase in the number of girls cycling since 2009?

Andrea Leadsom: I thought the hon. Gentleman was going to ask me whether I believed in the Loch Ness monster, but his question was much more serious than that. Cycling is absolutely to be recommended—it is fantastic for our health, and for reducing emissions—and it is great that so many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents are taking part in that bike ride.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Millions of people are not on the electoral register. There is anecdotal evidence that providing the necessary national insurance

[Nick Smith]

information could be part of the problem, especially for young people. May we have a statement about the sharing of data between public agencies to increase voter registration and help to boost our democracy?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important issue. We want to increase voter registration and ensure that as many people as possible participate in our democracy. Questions to the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission will take place on 9 May, and the hon. Gentleman may think it worth raising the point then to see what more can be done.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Would the Leader of the House consider arranging a debate in Government time on levels of support for black and minority ethnic women, particularly those with refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds? During the Easter recess I had the great privilege of attending the opening of a childcare and learning centre in my constituency by Saheliya, a charity that does fantastic work to empower such women, and to see how it is transforming lives. Will the Leader of the House commend its work, and also consider how it could provide an exemplar for the rest of the country?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has seen fit to raise this issue, and delighted by his happiness about the work that his constituents are doing. It is vital for us all to do everything we can to support refugees who have come to this country, particularly black and ethnic-minority women—and men as well, but it is often the women who have suffered so much. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue, and to praise that charity for what it is doing to highlight the need for further support.

Carbon Capture Usage and Storage

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.16 pm

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. Anna Turley will speak on her subject for up to 10 minutes. I remind colleagues that, because the statement is analogous with a ministerial statement, no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, the Chair will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and will call Anna Turley to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

I call Anna Turley to speak on behalf of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a true privilege for me to make this statement on behalf of the Committee. I do so in the absence of its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for providing the time for us to introduce our report on carbon capture usage and storage, which we published this morning, and I pay tribute to all my colleagues on the Committee, who have worked extremely hard. It is great to see some of them in the Chamber this afternoon. I also pay tribute to our brilliant Clerks, who do an enormous amount of work and without whom we could not produce anything at all.

The climate change protest that we have seen this week, and the words of Greta Thunberg in this place, show that there are hugely important national, local and international political decisions to be made on climate change. How we can drastically cut carbon emissions and achieve clean growth is an issue that we must devote huge energy to answering. Experts agree that carbon capture usage and storage—CCUS—will be necessary to meet the UK's existing climate change targets at the lowest cost: without it, the costs of meeting our targets will double. Scientists also agree that it would not be credible for the UK to adopt a more ambitious net zero target—a question on which the Committee on Climate Change will provide its advice next week—if we fail to deploy CCUS at scale.

As our report explains, the UK is very lucky to have one of the most favourable environments in the globe for this technology. However, CCUS has suffered from turbulent policy support for 15 years. Most significantly, two major competitions to demonstrate the technology—worth £1 billion—have been cancelled, one in 2011 and one in 2016, after hundreds of millions of pounds of investment by both industry and Government. That the technology works is not in question. There are 18 large-scale operational facilities worldwide, but no commercial-scale CCUS plants have yet been built in the UK.

The Government's clean growth strategy sets a new ambition to

“have the option to deploy CCUS at scale during the 2030s, subject to costs coming down sufficiently.”

The Committee welcomes that intention, but we are concerned that it does not demonstrate a sufficiently strong commitment and limits our climate change ambitions, the future for our heavy industries and the potential for investment in CCUS. CCUS is already the cheapest option—in some cases the only option—for decarbonising many of our energy-intensive industries. Our witnesses were optimistic about the potential for cost reductions but told us that these will come through deploying the technology, not by waiting for further research and development.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth—I pay tribute to her for her support—has explained that she has no target for CCUS for developers to meet in order to access funding, and that needs to be rectified. We recommend that the Government prioritise the development of clear ambitions that will bolster their renewed efforts to kick-start CCUS. Rather than seeking unspecified cost reductions, they should set out plans to ensure that projects are brought forward at least cost. It is also not clear what scale of deployment the Government are targeting for the 2030s, so we have recommended that they provide ambition and clarity to investors by adopting specific targets to store 10 million tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2030, and 20 million tonnes by 2035, in line with the advice of the Committee on Climate Change.

The UK has a unique opportunity to lead global development of a new CCUS industry, thanks to our expansive geological storage resource and our world-class oil and gas supply chains. However, despite that favourable position, CCUS remains a relatively immature technology. We argue that this should be seen as a benefit, as it strengthens the potential for UK leadership, and we recommend that the Government prioritise CCUS in order to benefit from growing international demand for low-carbon products and services. We risk losing our early mover advantage if the UK's slow progress on CCUS continues.

CCUS can impose significant costs on industrial processes, but a failure to develop it could force many heavy industries to close in the coming decades. Witnesses were frustrated that policy decisions have historically focused on the costs of the technology, rather than the benefits. The creation of a CCUS network on the east coast alone could create 225,000 jobs and boost the economy by over £160 billion by 2050. But the benefits of CCUS appear to be poorly understood across Government Departments, not least by the Treasury.

The Government have set a target to commission the first CCUS facility by the mid-2020s, but we heard that might be too slow to ensure that at-scale deployment can be achieved by the 2030s. A more ambitious target, with the development of CCUS clusters in multiple regions across the country, would strengthen the Government's strategy for developing prosperous communities across the UK. Our report recommends that the Government raise their ambition and aim to develop initial CCUS projects in at least three clusters by 2025, minimising the risk of further delays and ensuring that productivity benefits accrue across the country.

My own region of Teesside has an ambition to become one of Europe's first clean industrial zones using CCS. The Teesside Collective in my constituency, a consortium of local industries, stands ready and waiting to start decarbonising UK industry. Teesside is home to nearly 60% of the UK's major energy users in the process and

chemicals sectors. To keep these industries thriving and competitive in a low-carbon world, we need to get serious about cleaning up their emissions. In 2016 our industrial emissions fell massively, but that was largely due to the closure of our steelworks. It goes without saying that we cannot meet our emission targets that way; it is immoral.

The internationally renowned North East of England Process Industry Cluster represents chemical-based industries across the region, but they are particularly concentrated in Teesside. The sector generates £26 billion in annual sales and £12 billion in exports, and it is the north-east's largest industrial sector. The chemicals sector is up against strong international competition, and NEPIC estimates that the use of CCS could create and safeguard almost 250,000 jobs by 2060. Last year the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative announced a strategic partnership with six major oil and gas companies to construct the world's first ever gas-powered energy plant on Teesside. The clean gas proposals, when delivered, would deploy full-chain CCUS.

Another proposal, the H21 report, commissioned by two of the UK's gas distributors, Northern Gas Networks and Cadent, sets out a solution to decarbonise heat in the north of England by replacing natural gas with hydrogen. The proposals would also utilise CCS to make hydrogen production zero-carbon. That is something the all-party parliamentary group on hydrogen, which I am proud to chair, is working hard to champion. As more than half of the UK's hydrogen is produced in Teesside, the area's potential to capitalise on CCUS is again evident.

It is clear that the private sector is invested in the huge potential for carbon capture and storage. However, when we met Teesside Collective representatives during our evidence-gathering session, they were frustrated that the Treasury did not seem yet to have fully bought into the idea. Leadership and funding from the public sector and the Government will be crucial for getting this technology off the ground. The Government's attempts to develop CCUS have previously centred on funding competitions. Although we welcome the Government's renewed promise of funding support, we are concerned that yet another competition may not be best suited to the needs of the sector.

During the Committee's visit to Teesside, we heard strong opposition to the idea of a third competition, because it creates tension between competition and collaboration. The UK's CCUS community has had a strong culture of collaboration to date, but that is being undermined by the competition structure. They pitched projects against one another and expressly limited knowledge sharing, which in turn slowed technological progress, research and development, and cost reduction. The Government should urgently consult on better approaches to allocating funding for CCUS industry clusters, and to promoting collaboration across the UK, including in those clusters that might take longer to get going.

CCUS presents huge opportunities for the UK economy, and it is a vital technology if we are going to meet our climate change targets. I congratulate the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth on her championing of this technology. However, the Government's targets for CCUS remain far too ambiguous to ensure investment. It is also concerning that not all of Whitehall seems to see

[Anna Turley]

the advantages of CCUS. The Treasury has been singled out to us over and over again for its lack of awareness of the benefits. It is imperative that any future decisions on how and when to fund this technology are taken with a full and thorough understanding of the critical role it is expected to play, not only in decarbonisation across the whole economy, but in extending the life of and modernising UK industry, such as that in Teesside.

Finally, in response to the Committee's report, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has said:

"We are pleased that the Committee shares our belief that CCUS can play an important role in meeting our climate targets."

I am afraid that is disappointing, because it completely glosses over the profound differences between the Government's approach and that of the Committee. The Government are saying that CCUS can be part of the solution, subject to costs coming down sufficiently, to a figure that they are not yet prepared to specify. We are saying that CCUS must be part of delivering our climate change targets at the lowest cost. Having decided to go ahead with CCUS, the question now is how to keep the costs down. For the sake of jobs and the economy in areas such as Teesside, and for the future of our planet and our climate targets, we need no more words, just action.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on her statement. I too am a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and I take some pride in the report. I think it offers an exciting opportunity for the United Kingdom in what will be an ever-expanding global market for this technology. My question is based on a summary statement in the report:

"The greatest barriers to the development of CCUS in the UK are commercial, rather than technical."

I think that is true. There is a massive opportunity for Scotland in this technology, which is why I am surprised that not a single member of the SNP's parliamentary party has turned up for the statement—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The idea is to have fairly brief questions and answers, because we have a lot of business to get through this afternoon.

Stephen Kerr: My question is really quite simple. There is a commercial barrier and it relates to the business model. Requiring a single business to finance the capture, transport and storage of carbon will greatly increase the cost of carbon dioxide stored, so what can the Government do to enable the development of viable business models for CCUS?

Anna Turley: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his commitment to and support for this. He is absolutely right that there are important steps that the Government could take to support this, which the Committee discussed in detail. The report starts to set those out. In particular, we look at the development of viable business models. He will remember that our witnesses agreed that CCUS costs could be substantially lowered by separating the business model for carbon capture in industrial facilities from that of the transport and storage infrastructure.

That could create much less risk in part of the process, because those two activities have very different cost and risk profiles. The Government should put more effort into establishing that, because it is very important. Although transport and storage infrastructure is expensive, a single facility could receive carbon from multiple sites, and it is estimated that the costs of transport and storage per tonne could be reduced by as much as 90% if infrastructure costs are shared across multiple capture points. Infrastructure is critical, and that is where the Government could play a huge role.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): When the Committee put forward its requirement for investment in substantial capacity, what did it think the cost of that increased capacity would be, and who should pay the bill?

Anna Turley: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's point. I understand that, after losing those two projects, any Government will have to carry out a cost-benefit analysis, and expenditure was one of the issues that was raised. We know that CCUS projects today are already much cheaper than those involved in the previous competitions. At that point, the cost was between £1 billion and £2.5 billion, but the cost of the projects coming through today is well under £500 million. That is a result of the learning that we have done in that time. I believe that CCUS will play an essential part in meeting our climate change targets. All the evidence, particularly that of the Committee on Climate Change, shows that if we do not deploy CCUS, the cost of meeting our targets will double. The Energy Technologies Institute estimates that the cost would rise from 1% of GDP to 2% of GDP, so the question is not whether we can afford to do this but whether we can afford not to do so.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I should like to follow the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). The House will understand what the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) has been saying, which is summarised in paragraph 32 of the report and in paragraph 10 on page 28 of the conclusions. It is important to realise that if we had judged town gas when it was first generated in Marsham Street, we would never have had a national network of pipelines and the resulting benefits for most consumers. May I also remind the House, through the hon. Lady, that it has been stated, rather inaccurately, that politicians have got away with not doing anything to fight the climate crisis and the ecological crisis for too long. That is wrong, as the Committee has shown. This is also illustrated by the fact that more than half our electricity has been generated totally by non-carbon-generating systems in the past few weeks.

Anna Turley: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that huge steps have been made, but it is clear that we are in a climate emergency and that every step we can take will have an impact. We have a huge opportunity here for the UK to lead the way globally on a vital technology that can really help us to establish our climate credentials, meet the targets to which we are committed and create huge amounts of investment, jobs and opportunities in new green industries and technologies in areas such as mine. I am delighted to support this.

BILLS PRESENTED

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS (TERMINATION AWARDS AND SPORTING TESTIMONIALS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Amber Rudd, Secretary Greg Clark, Elizabeth Truss, Mel Stride, Robert Jenrick and John Glen, presented a Bill to provide for Class 1A national insurance contributions on certain termination awards; and to provide for the controller of a sporting testimonial to be the person liable to pay Class 1A national insurance contributions on payments from money raised by the testimonial.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 29 April, and to be printed (Bill 381) with explanatory notes (Bill 381-EN).

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (PREPARATION FOR DIGITAL SERVICES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary James Brokenshire, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr David Lidington, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Greg Clark, Mel Stride and Rishi Sunak, presented a Bill to make provision enabling the Commissioners for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to incur expenditure in connection with digital services to be provided by them for the purpose of facilitating the administration or payment of non-domestic rates in England.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 29 April, and to be printed (Bill 382) with explanatory notes (Bill 382-EN).

Backbench Business

School Funding

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Back-Bench motion on school funding. Before we start, I need to tell the House that we have, in theory, 28 speakers for the two debates this afternoon. I also have to take into account the opening speeches, the Front-Bench speeches and the wind-ups, so I ask the movers of the motions to stick to the limit of between 10 and 15 minutes, and I am sure colleagues would appreciate it if it were nearer to 10. I will also have to impose an immediate five-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

1.33 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern the increasing financial pressures faced by schools; further notes that schools are having to provide more and more services, including those previously provided by other public agencies including health and local authorities; notes with concern funds for schools being spread more thinly and not being sufficient to cope with additional costs; and further calls on the Government to increase funding provided to schools to cover the additional services schools now perform for pupils.

I will not take interventions, on the grounds that it is a hugely important debate. I first held a debate on this issue in October 2018 in Westminster Hall under the title "School Funding", and it was extremely well attended. The concerns expressed then about the level of school funding were consistent. Hopes were high that the Minister would be in listening mode and that the Chancellor would open his wallet to find some extra funds. Obviously, that extra funding has not appeared, so it is crucial that the subject of funding for schools should be revisited at the earliest opportunity. We in this House need to keep up the pressure.

I am sure that the British public can be forgiven for thinking this House has taken leave of its senses, with Brexit acting as an all-consuming topic to the apparent exclusion of all others. Indeed, the message from the Chancellor in his spring statement appeared to be that any spare funding that might be available was being stashed away until Brexit was resolved. Our inability to progress Brexit now means that the British taxpayer will be forking out millions for European elections that may or may not be needed, and billions to extend the Brexit can-kicking. It is time we put the focus back on to the future of our young people and children, who deserve a first-class education in a decent school environment, well-staffed with highly qualified teachers and with adequately resourced classrooms. Today, this House needs to reassert its priorities. We need to put Brexit on the back burner and say that what matters is the future of our young people.

This issue has attracted significant interest across the House and the application for this debate had around 50 supporters from almost every party represented in this Chamber. I am sure that, like other hon. Members, I could simply dust off my October speech, because I know from the feedback I have heard nationally and locally that nothing has significantly changed in the months since my last debate on this issue. Parents are told that they have a choice on where their children can

[Mrs Anne Main]

attend school, yet every year parents and pupils in my constituency are left scrabbling around for school places, with some being offered places a 40-minute drive away. The same Minister is with us today, and I hope that he does not just dust off his October speech, because quite frankly it was not helpful at the time. As I said in my winding-up speech last time, repeating the same mantra over and over again but not admitting that there is a deep-rooted, systemic problem makes the Government look cloth-eared.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): He's not listening.

Mrs Main: I hope that the Minister is listening, and I hope we can have another shot today at persuading him that this funding crisis needs addressing. Brexit cannot be used as an excuse to keep kicking this can into the long grass.

The Government have told us repeatedly that record levels of funding are going to our schools. The simple facts tell us that more money is being spent overall, and that is a good thing, but schools are not feeling the effects of that increase. Teachers and heads keep telling me that we must differentiate between the school's budget and the teaching budget, and that although more money is being spent on education, it does not necessarily filter down to improve the experience of pupils and teachers.

The pressures facing schools are widely known across the House and in the Department for Education. It should worry us that, earlier this month, over 1,000 councillors wrote to the Secretary of State demanding more money for local schools. That is not just about campaigning for the local elections. Many of those people are on parent-teacher associations and understand the pressures that their schools are under. The campaign supported by those councillors emphasised the real-terms cut in per-pupil funding and the severe problems faced by local authorities in funding education, particularly for special educational needs and disability—SEND—pupils. Their letter stated that, according to the Education Policy Institute, almost a third of all council-run secondary schools and eight in 10 academies are now in deficit.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently found that per-pupil school spending had fallen by 8% in real terms since 2010. That must be considered alongside the fact that, according to the DFE's own figures, there are now 500,000 more pupils in our schools than there were in 2010. That is half a million extra young minds to neuter—

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Nurture!

Mrs Main: Nurture! Not neuter!

That is half a million extra young minds to nurture, and that cannot be done on the cheap. I am not asking the Minister for a loaves-and-fishes miracle for my local schools. I do not expect a smaller amount of money to be spread among more people. I am asking for a financial settlement to reflect the extra strain on the budget, and a funding formula that delivers for all our schools. We must not rob Peter to pay Paul when the formula is next tinkered with.

The IFS has also reported that school sixth forms have endured a 21% reduction in per-pupil spending since 2011, and it estimates that by 2019-20, spending per sixth-form pupil will be lower than at any point since 2002. That is going back a very long way. I am sure that the Minister will agree that the picture varies, but the signs indicate that schools are not benefiting universally, and we must find a new funding formula. Many schools I have spoken to have reiterated that the national funding formula must cover the funding needed for schools, not just the pupil-led aspect. Pupils and parents expect those schools to be fit for purpose as well as to provide lessons.

The Sutton Trust reports that up to two thirds of secondary schools have had to cut teaching staff for financial reasons. We are also seeing a worrying trend in cuts to the extracurricular activities and facilities that can be so important for children as they make their way through their school careers. Around 60% of secondary school teachers have reported cuts in IT equipment for cost reasons, with 40% stating that school outings have been cut, too. We must therefore be concerned that almost a third of teachers polled by the Sutton Trust reported a cut in sporting provisions for pupils in their schools.

I said it in the previous debate and I will say it again that Sian Kilpatrick, the head of Bernards Heath Junior School in my constituency, wrote to parents—she is not alone in that—to explain the financial squeeze that her school faces due to funding restrictions. She compiled a list of all the additional things to which she must allocate funding—not a nice-to-have list, but a must-be-done list—that includes vital outdoor risk assessments, legal human resources advice, general maintenance costs and staff insurance payments, which are just some of the additional costs for which schools have to find money. On top of that, she even had to pay £8,000 to get her school's trees pruned. Schools across the country face similar shopping lists that will suck up vital school funding.

Schools are also concerned about their lack of ability to plan their finances. With the introduction of the national funding formula happening over several years, there is huge uncertainty about how it will affect individual schools, and headteachers are unwilling to commit to long-term planning, which cannot be right. Whichever Government are in power, we need long-term certainty for our schools' futures. Angela Donkin of the National Foundation for Educational Research cites several key factors that have stretched school budgets in recent years. I will not go through all the factors, because I know how many Members want to speak. I am sure that others will list them today, but they include, to name but a few, an increase in employer national insurance contributions and employer pension contributions, ageing building stock, the teacher pay award and the requirement for all students to continue in education.

The requirement on schools to offer services previously carried out by other public agencies can be seen across the country. A survey by WorthLess? found that 94% of headteachers polled said that their schools now routinely deliver services previously provided by local authorities. This is not a point of debate, but whoever is asked—no matter the local authority, county or politician—will agree with it. All these factors have resulted in immense strain on school budgets. More money is going into schools, but so much more is being asked of the money.

Staff and staffing costs are under severe pressure. Many school staff in my constituency cannot afford to live in the area, so the staff turnover and churn is huge. Many staff are let go because schools can find it easier and cheaper to take on newly qualified, less-expensive members of staff. With the difficult roles that our teachers now must fulfil, we cannot expect a school to be run by young, inexperienced teachers. Is it any wonder that the number of teachers leaving the profession within four years is on the rise and that the number of vacancies and temporarily filled posts is increasing?

I will not go through all my facts and figures, because I want to leave myself a couple of minutes to sum up at the end, but there is widespread unhappiness about the handling of the recent teacher pay announcement. The key problem is that schools themselves have to fund the first 1% of the pay rise—there is nothing like dipping one's hand into someone else's pocket, Chancellor. We want to pay our teachers and teaching assistants more, because they do a wonderful job, but if we increase their pay, we cannot expect schools to fund some of that increase, because the money will have to come from somewhere else. Declan Linnane, the head of Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School in St Albans, told me that the 1% increase alone will cost his school £30,000—money that he just does not have.

The Department for Education reports that upwards of 1 million pupils have special educational needs in our schools, and the number has risen significantly recently. Those children will often need classroom assistants and help, and they often represent an additional requirement on school resources, so is it any wonder that parents are telling me that there is often reluctance to statement children with special educational needs or that there are greater school exclusions among pupils with difficulties that manifest themselves in destructive classroom behaviour?

I will conclude my remarks with three questions for the Minister. First—this comes from a teacher in my constituency—what guarantees can we have regarding the cost of teacher pension contribution increases and salary increases? He said that we have only been given funding information for the 2019-20 academic year, with nothing beyond that point. Secondly, staff recruitment is at crisis level and recent initiatives are failing, so how can the Government make the profession more attractive to graduates? Thirdly, the basic rate for 16 to 19-year-old funding has been frozen at £4,000 a student since 2013-14, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that school sixth forms have faced budget cuts of 21% per student, so what commitment can the Minister give that that will be addressed?

1.44 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) and the other co-sponsors for securing this important debate on school funding. There are few subjects more important to this House than the future of the nation's children. They will be the inheritors of a post-Brexit Britain. They will be digital natives, as unfazed by digital technology as we are by electricity. We will bequeath to them the big challenges facing the country and the world, such as climate change, new kinds of labour market, and many more. That is why it is so important to invest in our young people's talents and ensure that they are among the best educated in the world.

Let me start with the ugly truth: this Government are letting the next generation down. Ministers are failing to make the necessary investment, and the Government are endangering our prosperity and productivity by not investing in education and skills.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I am conscious of the differences between the English and Welsh systems, but given the concerns of teachers, parents and students, does my hon. Friend agree that we need to be spending a higher percentage of our GDP on education?

Rushanara Ali: I absolutely agree. We need cross-party agreement to ensure that we invest in our children's futures, because that will ensure our nation's prosperity.

School funding has been cut in successive Budgets since 2010, and that has continued into this Parliament, as the hon. Member for St Albans mentioned. Since just 2015, when the previous Prime Minister won his short-lived majority, nine out of 10 schools have seen real-terms cuts in per-pupil spending. If Ministers had maintained spending even at 2015 levels, overall school funding would be £5.1 billion higher than it is. Across the board, from early years to further education, funding cuts are devastating our young constituents' lives when they should be supported.

The Education Policy Institute found that the proportion of local authority secondary schools in deficit has trebled to more than a quarter of all such schools. My constituency has the highest child poverty rate in the country, with an 11 percentage point increase since 2015, but its schools and colleges face drastic cuts. An enlightened Department for Education would put resources into the schools that need them, not take them away. Schools in my constituency face a £16 million funding cut between 2015 and 2020, which is an assault on aspiration.

Education in my constituency was transformed over the previous decade, thanks to investment and Government support, but taking all that away damages lives and makes matters worse. The same can be said for many constituencies across the House. It is so important to reverse the cuts and to reverse the increase in class sizes, because the same things are happening elsewhere, including in pockets of poverty in leafy suburbs—I recognise the points made by Conservative Members—but we must not punish poor areas such as my constituency by taking resources away. We must level up, not start a race to the bottom. We need to avoid a divisive approach that pits MPs against each other for much-needed resources for their schools, which has been the tendency over recent years following the assault on the fair funding formula and cuts more generally. We have fewer teaching assistants. Teachers are leaving education. There are massive problems with infrastructure and lack of investment. Just like the NHS, we need a new consensus to ensure investment and to protect young people's futures by ensuring that they can pursue meaningful careers and make a positive contribution to our society.

In the 2018 Budget, the Chancellor said that he would provide £400 million of extra cash, but the reality is that we need billions. He told the Treasury Committee yesterday that the comprehensive spending review could be delayed due to the lack of clarity around Brexit, yet the Government have spent over £4 billion preparing for a no-deal Brexit. We need to prioritise the comprehensive

[Rushanara Ali]

spending review, and if it does not come soon, the Government must step in and ensure that schools get the much-needed funding they require.

We need pupils to be taught in decent-sized, safe classrooms with good, modern equipment and with motivated teachers, tailored education for all and a range of cultural enrichments. We need to make sure pupils realise their full potential. We need to make sure the education system not only tackles social exclusion and discrimination but ensures that all children thrive so that we have the world-class economy we need to face future challenges. We need our education system to provide the future engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, artists and writers, and we need it to be the best in the world. That is what is lacking, because this Government lack the aspiration and the courage to invest in our future by investing in future generations of young people. I call on the Minister to take urgent action to invest in our schools to reverse the negative impacts and support our kids.

1.50 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): The Education Committee's inquiry on school and college funding has sought to bring together two seemingly irreconcilable views of the world. The first view is that schools are seeing year-on-year funding reductions and, having largely exhausted non-staff savings through efficiencies, are increasingly moving to the bulk of their budget, which is spent on staff, to find savings. The second view is that, amid the challenging public finances of 2010, difficult decisions were made that saw the core schools budget protected over the lifetime of that Parliament.

Of course the Government have a sense of the public finances, but so do schools, teachers and parents with whom we are in almost constant communication. I visit schools in my Harlow constituency every week and am well aware of the funding pressures they face. William Martin infant and junior schools have had to restructure staff and make £360,000 of savings to set a viable three-year budget. It is a matter of some regret that the debate on education funding has become so polarised. I hope that through our report we will be able to reduce the distance between the different viewpoints.

I am pleased that, with the emergence of a strong and independent evidence base provided by the National Audit Office, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Education Policy Institute, among others, the additional cost pressures faced by schools and the effect of rising pupil numbers are now understood and accepted as fact. The 2015 spending review missed a real opportunity by failing to anticipate the pressures that schools face and by not seeing the importance of transitional funding to support the implementation of the national funding formula.

Throughout our inquiry, we have been told that the school funding picture is much more complex than a simple question of inputs and outputs. Andreas Schleicher from the OECD explained how increasing education expenditure does not necessarily lead to greater performance, either in productivity or in international surveys such as PISA. Pumping huge amounts of money into the school system without a proper plan or programme of reform is unlikely to lead to good results. That has been illustrated throughout our inquiry.

We need to look at the pupil premium, because its accountability mechanisms seem totally ineffective. Teachers and headteachers have repeatedly told us that the money ends up being spent on matters wider than targeted support for disadvantaged children. What is to be done? In the past, the Government had something of a strategy for the school system, and the Minister for School Standards will update the Committee on that during a hearing on accountability next week, but we need to go beyond a more direct relationship between the Department and schools and articulate the purpose of education policy and schools at the moment. Is it to top the PISA rankings? Is it to produce a higher proportion of graduates? Is it to prepare the economy for the challenges of the fourth industrial revolution? Most importantly, is it to address social injustice in our education system?

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I respect the right hon. Gentleman's considerable experience in this field. Simon Kidwell, a headteacher in my constituency, has called for a more long-term funding arrangement. The current funding arrangement is just not sufficient to fund schools in my constituency and beyond.

Robert Halfon: I think what I am about to say will answer the hon. Gentleman's point, because I strongly agree with him.

I want Ministers, in the strongest possible terms, to embrace wholeheartedly our proposal to have a 10-year strategic plan for education. Indeed, I am encouraged by the Minister's response to the Committee at the beginning of the month. There has to be a shared vision beyond the next election, whenever that might be. The principle of school-based autonomy lay at the heart of policy in 2010. We have identified some of its limitations, particularly when it comes to governance, financial management and accountability. But autonomy within boundaries is a sound principle from which to start.

A 10-year strategic plan ought to be accompanied by a long-term funding plan, as the hon. Gentleman has just said. That funding plan, if not stretching beyond the spending review period, should set clear expectations for what it would cost to fund schools and colleges to do their jobs.

The NHS now has a long-term, 10-year strategic plan and a five-year funding settlement, which has come about following serious advocacy by NHS England and by the previous and current Health Secretaries, who strongly made the case both for more funding and for funding accompanied by proper reform. It mystifies me that perhaps the most important public service of all, education and skills, does not seem to receive the same attention or public advocacy for a similar path.

I have said in the Education Committee that the Department is sometimes like the cardinals at the Vatican in its negotiations with the Treasury, hoping that a bit of white funding smoke may appear from the rooftops, but, as the NHS argument has shown, this is not the right approach. I very much hope the Department will negotiate a 10-year plan with the Treasury and come to the House, as the Health Secretary did, to set it out. We need a proper funding settlement lasting at least five years, just as the national health service has had, so we can stop having these day-to-day battles on the finances of schools and further education colleges and so that our wonderful teachers can carry on teaching and our children can carry on learning.

1.57 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

As the daughter of two teachers, I remember the 1980s and '90s as a time of chronic underfunding in our schools. There were not enough books to go around, and lessons were held in crumbling classrooms and temporary huts. I recall my parents being overworked, undervalued and underpaid, and my dad, a local National Union of Teachers branch chair, fighting for better conditions for both pupils and staff. The teachers at my school worked tirelessly, and I owe them a huge debt of gratitude, but it often felt like the Government and the local authority had no aspiration for the girls at my south-east London comprehensive.

If we keep on the current trajectory of underfunding and asking ever more of our teachers, I fear we are likely to end up repeating the mistakes of the past. Every child deserves a decent education, regardless of who they are and where they live. The remedy to our current schools funding crisis is quite simple: investment in schools yields results. Between 1997 and 2010, education spending rose by 78%, the biggest increase over any decade since the mid-1970s. Full-time-equivalent teacher numbers rose by 48,000, school buildings were transformed and attainment levels soared. Yet since 2010, under successive austerity and cost-cutting Governments, we have seen school funding slip back to profoundly inadequate levels. On current trends, schools in Lewisham and Bromley will see real-terms cuts of £8.8 million and £14.1 million respectively between 2015 and 2020, an average of around £300 per pupil.

When the Chancellor came to this House to deliver his Budget, his promise of the “little extras” for schools was little more than a platitude—this was a mere £45 extra per pupil. These token gestures of cash here and there go no way to repairing the damage that long-term underinvestment has done to our schools. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies annual report on education spending in England, even if per pupil funding had been maintained at 2015 levels, annual spending on schools would be £1.7 billion higher this year.

The Government have been warned time and again about the damage that austerity is having on the education sector and have had ample opportunity to change course. However, throughout this austerity-driven funding, since 2010, we have seen £3.5 billion-worth of cuts to schools and average teacher pay down £4,000 in real terms. I have visited more than 30 schools in my constituency since my election, and have been consistently told that recruitment and retention are major issues across the board. Teachers are the backbone of the schools system, but a recent poll showed that 81% of teachers said they have considered leaving the profession because of the pressures of workload. Teachers are working harder but losing out in their pay packets. If this Government really value the work of teachers, they should match their rhetoric with the funding and pay that teachers not only require, but fully deserve.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ellie Reeves: I will not give way, because of time constraints.

As the motion notes,

“schools are having to provide more and more services, including those previously provided by other public agencies including health and local authorities”.

We have recently been in the midst of a knife crime crisis in this country, and my constituents have experienced the shock and anger of seeing young people needlessly losing their lives as a result. I am pleased that there is consensus for a public health approach to tackle knife crime, but that can be successful only if we see funding restored to local public services. It is imperative that this also includes a boost to school funding. Schools are having to do more and more. This Government cannot stand by, continuing to increase the burden but neglecting to increase the funding. So I have to urge the Minister: it is surely time to think again about the funding modelling used at present and to make the changes necessary to properly invest in our children's futures.

2.2 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, you may recall that I once, shamefully, fell asleep in this Chamber, but I assure you that I have never been so exhausted as when, for seven years, I was a schoolmaster. I go away every summer to teach in Africa to remind myself of just what a demanding occupation it is. When I visit schools in my constituency and see the product they are turning out, in the face of extraordinary difficulties, I realise what an easy ride I had as a “beak”—I gave up teaching 30 years ago.

I have raised this issue with the Minister before. I accept that expenditure is at an all-time record and that although there has been some pressure on per-pupil funding, we spend more per pupil than any other wealthy country in the world bar the United States. But I want the Minister to focus on whether we are actually comparing like with like, and to consider what we are expecting our schools to do. Good schools in my constituency—96% of the pupils in my constituency attend good or outstanding schools—not only concentrate on subject teaching, as they do in so many other comparator nations, but turn out the whole person ready for life. It is exactly that strength of the British educational system that has made it such an envy of the rest of the world, providing quality and character for the whole person.

Of course, all sorts of savings might be had. We could narrow the curriculum. We could stop teaching some of the more expensive subjects, such as design and technology, which is taught in my constituency—not all schools do that—but I say to the Minister what a terrible tragedy it would be, in the modern world, to deny students that opportunity. We could reduce the level of pastoral support that schools are putting in. It is expensive, but it does ensure that so many pupils facing all sorts of issues are able to be in the classroom, benefiting from being taught. We could get rid of the classroom assistants or reduce their number, and some schools in my constituency are having to do that. After all, we did not have classroom assistants when I was at school. Clearly, however, we all understand that there are any number of vulnerable pupils who would simply not be able to take advantage of the curriculum were it not for the exemplary work undertaken by those classroom assistants. Schools might get rid of their school student counsellors—we did not have those when I was at school—but these schools are facing any number of problems, anxieties and mental

[*Sir Desmond Swayne*]

health issues among students that we never encountered in my day. Furthermore, the counsellors' time could be filled threefold, even at this current level. The infrastructure to deal with those problems outside schools simply does not exist—perhaps it ought to, but the reality is that it does not.

Any number of extra-curricular activities are dispensed and simply are not provided in some of the comparator nations where per-school expenditure is measured. So we could stop all those expensive dramatic productions. We could get rid of the fixture lists, and all the training and matches that take place. We could close down the Duke of Edinburgh awards. There is even a school in my constituency that runs a walled garden and keeps pigs. None of that was necessary in my day, but what a tragedy it would be to lose it.

In Hampshire, we are spending £3,811 per pupil in primary and £4,935 per pupil in secondary. The Secretary of State is getting a bargain; there are parents who are spending tens of thousands of pounds a year on their children to get a similar product. Will he bear that in mind, as well as the strength and importance of that product, as he takes forward his planning for the next financial review?

2.7 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Education is the foundation of aspiration and the engine of social mobility, and it needs continued and growing investment. The best teachers and schools are part of the community, promoting the best educational welfare for the children for that community. But I hear overtures from the schools in the north-east and in Sedgefield and alarm bells are ringing, with budgets being cut, teaching staff being made redundant and parents fundraising for the essentials. Some £7 billion has been cut from the education budget for schools and colleges. Real-terms spending has reduced from £95.5 billion to £87.8 billion. In the north-east of England, 842 schools out of 1,004 that have been analysed face funding cuts. In County Durham, 194 schools out of 243 face cuts to their finances; the authority's schools will lose £8.1 million by 2020. This is second only to Northumberland in the region, which is set to see a cut of £8.9 million. In total, schools in the north-east will see a cut of £60 million. This is not good enough.

What is also not good enough is that according to the National Association of Head Teachers, 5,400 teachers have been cut nationally—that comes on top of cuts of 2,800 teaching assistants, 1,400 support staff and 1,200 auxiliary staff. The number of pupils being taught in supersize classes has trebled in the past five years. The proportion of local authority maintained primary schools that have spent more than their income rose significantly to more than 60% in 2016-17. Schools are having to make difficult decisions, as budgets have not kept pace with rising costs since 2010. The Bank of England points out that £100-worth of goods in 2010 costs more than £120 today, which is a 20% increase. Obviously school budgets have not risen in line with these rising costs.

Furthermore, there is a growing funding crisis for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. Because of cuts to local authority budgets affecting services to schools to support children with these needs, schools now have to find the first £6,000 of a support plan,

which is taken from the wider school budget rather than specific special needs-related funding. Durham County Council told me that it has a projected deficit in the high-needs budget for children with special educational needs and disabilities of £5 million by 2020. This comes at a time when need is increasing dramatically. The council is now needing to use funding from its reserves on a one-off basis to plug the deficit. A solution must be found in 2020-21, as the council cannot use reserves again for this purpose.

Using reserves to fund statutory duties for the education of our children is not sustainable. The educational opportunities of our children are being challenged now—teachers know it and parents know it. Local teachers tell me that because of the budget restraints, they have to cut back on the teaching and non-teaching staff who provide support for more vulnerable pupils; on repairs to schools buildings; and on the renewal of equipment, among other things.

A couple of weeks ago, a group of parents with children at Fishburn Primary School came to see me. They are leading a campaign against education cuts at the school. Scott Emsbury, Alana Baker and Katrina and Justin Boulton are deeply concerned about the pressure that budget cuts are placing on the school. They know that the teaching staff, led by Danny Eason, and all those who work at the school, are excellent and are doing their best, but they are now deeply concerned. The school will see a reduction in teaching staff because of budget cuts, and the ability to stretch the interests and minds of young children through additional activities is being challenged. The parents are organising petitions and fundraising events to provide the essentials, and doing everything they can to publicise the issues facing their local school.

Durham County Council told me that Fishburn Primary School will have a deficit of somewhere in the region of £20,000 by the end of the 2019-20 budget period. Had the funding formula kept pace with inflation, the school would have received £4,357 per pupil, rather than £4,000—it would have received £170,000 more since 2012-13. The Minister may say that funding has increased and that everything in the garden is rosy, but if parents are having to fundraise for the essentials, such an assertion is not adequate. Parents having to fundraise for the essentials to ensure the education of their children reminds me of when my children were at primary school: we had to fundraise then, back in the early 1990s—and we had a Tory Government then, too.

2.12 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): There is a real sense of *déjà vu* about this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) had a debate on 24 October, as she said, and there was an estimates day debate on 26 February and then another debate on 4 March, after the big petition. Like my hon. Friend, I spoke in all those debates, but the situation remains the same, so I pay tribute to her perseverance. I also pay tribute to all our teachers for the huge challenge that they face. Hopefully, they are currently busy nurturing our pupils, not neutering them, as my hon. Friend suggested earlier.

I shall pick up where I left off: the last time around in Westminster Hall, I was rudely interrupted after just four minutes of speaking. I had generously given way to

interventions, only for the scorers not to credit me with the extra injury time. I am happy to take interventions this time, if the scorers are awake. At that time, I described the funding crisis in schools as a national emergency; alas, nothing has changed. West Sussex was at the bottom of the fourth quartile for funding; after the changes to the national funding formula, we are still in the bottom quartile. That is why, of the 25,222 responses to the consultation on the fair funding formula, no less than 9% were representations from West Sussex. Although I cannot speak for the Minister, who is also a West Sussex MP, I can, then, speak for my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and other West Sussex MPs.

As I have said before, I went to see all the headteachers—I got them all together—and all the chairs of governors in my constituency so that they could give me real-life examples of the funding challenges facing them now. They did not give scare stories or tell me about prospective challenges, but told me about what they are facing now. As a result of that, I wrote an eight-page letter to the Secretary of State to set out many of the problems, to which I shall refer in a moment.

First, let me mention two new things. I was recently asked to go and see some nursery school providers in my constituency. I thought I was meeting two or three, but 50 turned up. There are serious problems with how the 30 hours' funded childcare—it is not free but funded—is being reimbursed to independent nurseries. Some 81% of children in non-domestic settings are in independent nurseries, of which 90% say that the reimbursement does not cover the full costs of that provision. Many are at risk of having to turn away some of the most deprived families. Nursery closures were up 66% in the past year and 5,000 places have been lost. It is a false economy not to fund important pre-school settings properly.

Secondly, the Minister might want to comment on the future of the pupil premium in the light of a report from the Sutton Trust. Will we make sure that the pupil premium is part of the new funding round? There are concerns that increasingly the pupil premium is being used, particularly in the more deprived schools, to plug gaps in the school budget, rather than to fund the pupils who specifically need it.

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend was a brilliant children's Minister and knows an enormous amount about this subject. He mentioned the pupil premium; does he agree that how it is used should be much more accountable? The Government need to look into whether it is working and how the money is being spent, because it should be spent on the most disadvantaged pupils.

Tim Loughton: That is absolutely right. Before my right hon. Friend became its Chair, the Education Committee did a report and found out that the pupil premium was not going to those pupils for whom it was absolutely intended, and for whom it was absolutely essential to make sure that they could close the gap with the children who did not qualify for it.

Another issue that I wish to raise with the Minister again—I did not get a proper reply the previous time—is the justification for schools having to fund out of their own budget the 2% pay rise in salaries this year. That is a significant hit on our schools. In February, the Government said in their paper on school costs that

schools could be far more efficient and save a lot of money if they had better procurement methods, but the trouble is that in many of my local schools the staffing budget now accounts for something like 90% of the school budget. The savings the Government describe can be made only against soft costs, which are going up by 2% because of the salary award. I really do want an explanation of how the Department expects schools to pick up the bill for that additional 2% out of school funding, given all the other competing challenges they have.

Let me refer to a few of the points that came out of my roundtable meetings in my constituency. Shortfalls are being clawed back by reducing staffing costs, which in some cases account for 90% of a school's budget, as I said. In one medium-sized primary school, teaching assistant support has been reduced by more than 200 hours. The school has reduced its budget for continuing personal development training for staff, and its inclusion co-ordinator has not been replaced.

At a junior school, the professional development budget, which in previous years was between £3,500 and £5,000, is now zero. The extended curriculum budget, which was between £19,000 and £20,000 in previous years, is now £500. The learning resources budget, which was up to £120,000, is now just £35,000.

At a medium-sized primary school in my constituency, high-level teaching assistants are being used to cover classes so that the school can cut supply-staff costs. The school is unable to pay overtime. Counselling levels have fallen, which I am particularly concerned about. We know about the support that school-age children need because of the pressures on mental health from social media, peer pressure and other things. If we do not have that in-school support, it will be a false economy because the children involved will not be able or prepared to take advantage of their education.

There are real problems in special schools. This year, there will be at least nine more pupils at one special school in my constituency than there were in the previous year, but there will be no additional teaching staff. These are specialist schools with high-demand pupils getting no more teaching staff to help to look after them.

A secondary academy in my constituency has had to narrow the curriculum on offer to cut costs. The school is unable to meet the demand for counselling—there is currently a four-month waiting list. A small primary school is reducing swimming lessons and music lessons. All these are real-life examples of the effect of this funding now. It is essential that the comprehensive spending review this year does something about this situation urgently.

2.18 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). I declare an interest: I come from a family of teachers, including a niece, who is still teaching.

As far as I know, no politician ever got elected saying, "I want to spend less money on schools," but that is what we got. I am sure the Minister will tell us that the Government are spending more than ever on education, and of course that is true in cash terms, but as well as being able to add up, my constituents can do long division and they can observe what is happening in schools.

[Thangam Debbonaire]

The Minister may wish to disagree with my arithmetic, or that of headteachers in Bristol, but I wonder whether he will accept that the chair of the UK Statistics Authority and the Institute for Fiscal Studies can do their numbers. Sir David Norgrove, chair of the UK Statistics Authority, said last October in a letter to the Secretary of State, in response to a blog by the Department for Education about education funding, that

“figures were presented in such a way as to misrepresent changes in school funding...school spending figures were exaggerated by using a truncated axis, and by not adjusting for per pupil spend.”

Those are not my words; they are the words of the chair of the UK Statistics Authority. He also noted that the Department

“included a wide range of education expenditure unrelated to publicly funded schools”.

In his response, the Secretary of State said that his Department was looking into the issues and admitted that “pupil numbers are rising” and that

“we are asking schools to do more and schools are facing cost pressures”,

but that is precisely my point.

I have made the point several times in this place, including to the Prime Minister, that if we increase cash funding but costs and pupil numbers rise as well, we will quickly get, in effect, a real-terms cut, and that is where we are. National insurance, teacher pay and pensions, the apprenticeship levy, rising pupil numbers, rising levels of special needs—these are all increased costs. However, as other services are cut, such as mental health support and youth work, schools are forced to try to step into the breach, but again without the money. They are being held responsible for just about every other social problem, so more pressures on and more cuts to other local services lead to more yet costs to schools—a real-terms cut.

In my constituency, Redland Green School has said that special educational needs

“are getting greater but are not being matched with funding”.

The school also told me that it cannot refer students to childhood mental health services unless they have seen a school counsellor, but there is no funding for the school counsellor. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found last year that total spending per pupil fell by about 8% or about £500 per pupil between 2009-10 and 2017-18. The effects of those cuts—and yes, they are cuts—is that schools have been forced to cut to the bone and beyond. Schools in Bristol West have told me about cuts to support staff, cuts to learning support staff, increases in class sizes and cuts to the curriculum. They have told me that they have had to cut languages and creative subjects, as well as politics, which frankly I deeply deprecate. I do not think they should have to.

St Bonaventure’s School has told me of fears of its reading recovery scheme being cut, and St John’s Primary School has had to cut a successful maths intervention. There is no money to fund professional development and training, and replacing teaching staff now routinely involves sacrificing quality for lower pay offers. It is not that the teachers are not good; they just are not as experienced, and that is not good enough. Parents, children, teachers and other school staff in Bristol West tell me that schools are being forced to do very much more with very much less money, and that is not okay.

When this Government cut education, they limit life chances. When they fail to care for children’s mental health, they build up problems for the future. And when they hold schools responsible for just about everything and fund them only to the bare minimum or less, we all lose out. Among the pupils at St Bonaventure’s, St John’s, Cotham and all the other schools in my constituency, there might be one who is going to invent a cost-effective way of making tidal power work and fuel us all for the future so that we can give up fossil fuels, or a cure for cancer. In fact, I discovered recently that, thanks to an outstanding science project, some pupils at Cotham School are working on exactly that.

Compounding all that is this Government’s utter shamelessness. As the chair of the UK Statistics Authority and the Institute for Fiscal Studies have said, school funding is being cut, and this Government will not admit it. I said earlier that no politician got elected saying that they were going to spend less, but that is what is happening. This country needs a different Government. It needs a Labour Government who will put the education, care and mental health of children and young people at the top of their list, along with tackling climate change. For the children of Bristol West, that cannot come a moment too soon.

2.23 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): The flaws in the old school funding system are well known, and it is clear that the new fairer funding formula addresses many of those issues. There was a distinct sense of a postcode lottery, with the cash value assigned to what a child and their education deserves being tied as much to their geography as to their ability or needs. The fact that five of the 10 most cash-rich schools in the country are in Tower Hamlets shows the uneven concentration of resources in certain geographical areas.

The new formula represents the greatest leap forward in school funding for a generation and was backed with an additional £1.3 billion in investment above and beyond previously agreed spending plans. The new formula means that the amount allocated to schools better reflects the needs and characteristics of individual schools and their pupils. I am grateful that my area of South Gloucestershire received an additional £8 million as a result of the new formula—one of the largest increases in the country—and that our total education budget now stands at around £208 million. As well as what central Government are doing, I welcome the news that the Conservative administration on South Gloucestershire Council has announced plans to invest an additional £78 million in school buildings, including providing a brand-new primary school, two new special schools and money for new windows, heating systems and roofs. In addition, it is making available £100,000 in match funding to double the spending power of the “Friends of” groups in schools to help them to deliver projects.

However, I also recognise that, more often than not, there are no easy answers in politics and there are issues that remain to be addressed. I am concerned that, despite a large increase, South Gloucestershire has now slipped to become the worst-funded education authority in the country, something that I do not feel is justified, given that there are places that are both more affluent and have better school performance. In recent weeks I have met my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools

Standards, who offered some constructive ways forward to address my concerns and later visited Patchway Community School in my constituency, where three of my children went, to see the reality on the ground in the lowest-funded authority in the country. It is a school in great disrepair that needs additional investment and quite a bit of work to say the least. I am heartened that the Government are listening carefully and taking seriously the issues raised with them, not only by me but by other colleagues in this House and the f40 group.

One thing that is rightly being brought under closer scrutiny is the salaries for senior leadership in academy trusts. The Public Accounts Committee alluded to that in its March 2018 report on academy schools' finances. One of its conclusions reads:

"Some academy trusts appear to be using public money to pay excessive salaries...Unjustifiably high salaries use public money that could be better spent on improving children's education and supporting frontline teaching staff, and do not represent value for money. If the payment of such high salaries remains unchallenged, it is more likely that such high salaries become accepted as indicative of the market rate. This could then distort the employment market in the sector for senior staff."

I am particularly concerned that trusts such as the Olympus Academy Trust in my area are asking for donations and contributions from parents towards the most basic supplies, such as textbooks, while their chief executives are taking home in their pension contributions what some parents earn in a year, let alone their six-figure salaries, which continue to balloon.

Dave Baker, the chief executive of the Olympus Academy Trust, now earns up to £125,000, having been awarded a pay rise of between £5,000 and £10,000 last year, putting him £10,000 above the benchmarking suggested for a CEO of a trust the size of Olympus in the Kreston report, published in January, and that does not include his pension contribution of up to £20,000. Shortly before the 2017 general election, he announced the possibility of going to a four-day week, cutting classroom support and restricting the curriculum for the over 6,400 students in his care. That caused significant distress and upset among many parents in my area.

It is important to get school funding right, and it is a work in progress at governmental level. However, the image of school executives on bumper wage packets that dwarf what most people can ever hope to earn presenting begging bowls to parents who are just about managing leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of my constituents and is engendering understandable anger among them. I would like to see greater transparency and accountability for excessive executive salaries, and I am encouraged by the Government's stance on challenging academies to justify high salaries. I have submitted a freedom of information request to the Olympus Academy Trust for the full details of all remuneration packages for members of staff at the trust earning more than £100,000 per annum. It is important that those taking large salaries from the public purse offer value for money to the taxpayer and deliver stellar outcomes for the next generation. I ask that the Government continue their approach of challenging and scrutinising academies to ensure that that is the case.

2.28 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I think it is pretty clear to most in and outside this Chamber how I feel about the current crisis in our education system.

What I do not want to hear from the Government is that school spending has never been higher. It is just not true. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has stated that school funding per pupil fell by 8% in real terms between 2010 and 2018, while post-16 education has seen a 20% fall.

Pupil numbers in secondary education are rising, and the number of secondary school students is due to rise by 14.7% by 2027. Costs have been rising and are continuing to rise—teachers' pensions, national insurance contributions and the apprenticeship levy to name but a few. Only two schools in my constituency of Colne Valley have not experienced a shortfall in funding since 2015. Over two thirds of schools in Colne Valley have seen a cut to funding of more than £150 per pupil since 2015, and seven have lost over £400 per pupil.

The Sutton Trust has found that over two thirds of secondary school heads have said that financial pressures have forced them to cut staff. Schools are shortening the school week, and literally turning the lights off. Teachers are paying for classroom resources out of their own money. Our school buildings have leaking roofs, and buckets are placed around the building to collect drips from the leaks. It is just shameful.

The curriculum is also being squeezed. The Fabian Society has revealed a drastic decline in arts provision in our primary schools. The Sixth Form Colleges Association has uncovered that 50% of schools and colleges have dropped A-level courses in modern foreign languages. Research by Sussex University found that the number of schools offering music A-level had fallen by more than 15% in the past two years. A narrow curriculum limits children's opportunities, and their ability to adapt and engage in different types of learning.

Support for pupils is also struggling to survive the budget cuts. Colne Valley headteachers have told me that funding pressures have led to cuts in learning resources, staffing, and provision for special education needs and disabilities. As the Education Committee found when taking evidence during the inquiry into SEND, schools and local authorities are struggling to provide the necessary support, causing stress for pupils and their families, and demand is growing. And here's the thing: this debate is about school and college funding, but the problems we are seeing in the system are not just about the lack of sufficient funding in schools. It is about schools picking up the cost of a near decade of cuts to public health, youth services, community outreach, early intervention services and housing benefit, and the roll-out of universal credit.

Between 2010 and 2020, local authorities will have seen reductions of £16 billion to core Government funding. Inevitably, this causes a reduction of provision in areas such as social care and support for families, and for agencies such as the police force. Schools are having to divert the scarce resources they have to cover for services that no longer have the capacity to provide the support so desperately needed by young people and their families. Schools are the hub of our communities. They are on the frontline every day. I know; I have been there. They support our youngest and most vulnerable. We need well trained, motivated and passionate teachers who believe in the common purpose of preparing children and young people for life and the love of lifelong learning.

[*Thelma Walker*]

The gravity of the situation is only too clear to many of us here. For the first time, thousands of headteachers marched on Westminster, hundreds of maintained nursery staff marched on Westminster, teaching unions are united and marching on Westminster, and parents, teachers and governors are united and marching on Westminster. Listen to the professionals. Listen to the parents. Take action now. Everyone is related in some way to a teacher or has children in school. These people can see the system as it is at the moment, and they will be using their vote in the next election, whenever that may be. It will be education, and our country's respect and value for it, that will help to return the Labour party to government.

2.33 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) and others on securing this debate.

Let me first acknowledge the efforts that preceding Conservative-led Governments have made over the past decade, constantly increasing the schools block budget. Funding for our children's primary and secondary schools has gone up from £30.4 billion in 2010 to £43.5 billion for next year—a £13 billion increase. Since 2010, more children are in good or outstanding schools, the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils has been lowered, and there are tens of thousands more teachers and teaching assistants. However, funding is only one measure. Schools are performing so much better than before, but I must recognise concerns raised by my local headteachers and parents about available funding, as schools are having to meet costs that they never did before, and I am speaking today to give them a voice in this Chamber.

The Library estimates that my constituency has benefited from a 6% real-terms increase to the schools block funding since 2013, from £57 million to £61 million. This is good news, but per pupil funding has gone down, indicating that there are more pupils than before. There is more money, but it is being thinly spread, and this is one reason that school budgets are under more pressure.

Locally, headteachers at Helena Romanes School, Saffron Walden County High School and Joyce Frankland Academy, among others, have told me about the issues that they and their staff are facing. These issues include more lessons being taught with fewer teachers, as those who retire from the profession are not replaced; schools having to rely on donations from generous parents and carers for extracurricular clubs; stopping the late school bus service; and simply not having enough resources. Additionally, although school spending has increased since the end of the last decade and now stands at just under £5,100 per pupil, reductions to sixth-form funding and local authority services have affected budgets and provisions for school transport and pastoral care. Teachers in my constituency continue to do fantastic work despite these pressures, because they are motivated first and foremost by giving children the best possible education.

I know that the Minister acknowledges the hard work of teachers across the country, and ask him also to recognise the passion shown by my local teaching staff and to help support them by taking into account our rise in pupil numbers when considering funding allocations. More still needs to be done, but I appreciate that the

Government have already taken positive steps to bridge current funding gaps, which is encouraging. Earlier this month, the Secretary of State wrote to colleagues to confirm that the Government would be funding all state-funded schools, further education and sixth-form colleges to cover increased employee contributions in the teachers' pension scheme, helping to relieve pressure on schools. This is a measure that I personally lobbied for, so I thank the Government.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Like my hon. Friend, I am an Essex MP, and like her, I have heard concerns from my local headteachers about funding. Does she agree that the national funding formula is a necessary reform, but that we need to put more money into it at the spending review this year to ensure that more school pupils benefit?

Mrs Badenoch: My hon. Friend makes a very good point; I agree with him completely.

Just over 13,000 new school places have been added in Essex, alongside seven new free schools and a further eight schools to follow. There is a need for more funding, as my local schools have called for, and I am pleased that the Government have already started to account for this. Over the next two years, total funding in the county will rise by £48.7 million to £855.8 million. This is welcome news and demonstrates continued progress under this Government to improve the quality of teaching.

The Government have a record to be proud of, as 90% of children in Essex attend schools rated good or outstanding, compared to 67% in 2010, and 66% of pupils are reaching the expected key stage 2 standard in reading and writing. [*Interruption.*] Opposition Members may laugh, but the truth is that it is not just about the money that is spent, but the outcomes that we measure, and we are doing very well on outcomes. We are asking schools to do much more than they ever have, and it is only right that we give them much more money to do so. I encourage Ministers to listen closely to my schools' funding concerns.

3.37 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The pressures that schools face are growing. We know it across this House, and we hear it from heads, teachers and parents alike. The message—just like the message that many of us have heard about the climate crisis this week—could not be clearer. As some hon. Members have said already, the special educational needs of pupils are increasingly challenging. Heads have told me directly that they do not know how their secondaries will cope when the numbers of younger children who are now being diagnosed start to come through. I have heard estimates that genuinely shock me.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps worse than the headline figures—millions and billions of pounds—is the fact that a commonplace discussion with every single headteacher, when we visit schools every week, is how they are making fundamental cuts to their staffing, special needs and other budgets? Should not the Minister look at that?

Lyn Brown: I absolutely agree.

As many as a third of pupils in some local nursery classes are now thought to need some support. That is massive. In Newham, the challenge for schools is only

likely to get bigger. Hundreds of local children who need an education, health and care plan or a statement do not yet have one. Official statistics show that EHC plan and statement rates for Newham are currently five times lower than for any other inner-London borough. The council is working hard to turn this around, but these current low rates mean that the challenge for local schools is just beginning, and they are struggling to keep up. The funding for the specialist, trained support that large numbers of children now need simply is not there. The average funding available for each child with an EHC plan has fallen by a fifth over the past five years.

I want to raise just one example—I would have given many more if we had had longer. Adam is nine. He has complex behavioural and emotional challenges. He has an EHC plan and is supposed to receive speech and language therapy and psychological help. He simply does not get it. The support services have been cut far too much. Most of the speech and language staff are now temporary or agency workers, so there is no consistency, and there are long gaps in Adam's access to services. Cuts to the psychological services mean he has not had any of the support he needs for his emotional and behavioural challenges, and his ability to learn and grow as a healthy member of his community will obviously be hugely affected.

Adam's primary school in Newham has got to the point where it simply cannot meet his needs. Between 2015 and 2018, it lost more than £100,000 from its budget every single year—more than £400 for every pupil. How foolish will Adam's generation think we were because we did not invest in them or him and left his and their potential unfulfilled? Like climate change, this is an issue where we are letting our children down. What kind of country are we living in?

The achievements of Newham's young people are extraordinary, given the circumstances, and our teachers are amazing—I see it on so many school visits—but the achievements of our children are made against the odds, despite the barriers and with no thanks to this Government, who will have cut Newham's schools by £37.5 million since 2015—a cut of £445 for each and every pupil. The Government need to wake up to the long-term damage they are doing. They need to give Newham's schools and other schools the funding they need to keep up with rising pupil numbers and inflation, to reduce the impacts of the poverty and inequalities their policies are increasing and to pay for proper support so that pupils with increasing needs can fulfil their potential as well.

2.42 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I represent parts of West Berkshire Council area and parts of Wokingham Borough Council area. Both councils face exactly the same problems with schools. In both cases, we receive very low amounts per pupil compared with the national average, so we cannot provide as varied or as richly resourced a curriculum as better-endowed schools.

The biggest problem we face, which I hope the Minister and his colleagues will address urgently, is on high needs. It should be the area we are keenest to help on. The pupils who require that special support need to be properly supported financially from the centre, as well as supported by local professionals. In West Berkshire,

I am advised that there will be over 9% more pupils needing that support this year but that its budget has gone up by 0.5%. How does the Minister think we will manage to pay for all those extra pupils who need that extra support when the budget is so meantly set?

In Wokingham, too, there is quite rapid growth in the numbers requiring support and very little growth in the money being made available. Wokingham has the additional problem that because we are an extremely fast-growing part of the country—we are taking a large number of new houses—we are way behind in putting in the necessary educational provision for special needs, so Wokingham now has to find facilities for 119 special needs pupils outside the borough because nobody has bothered to make the money available so that we can catch up. It would be better, and probably better value, if more of that provision could be local, close to where the children and their parents live, but this is not an option, given the delay.

I have raised with the Minister before the issue of general schools funding, which has been made more difficult by the rapid growth in pupil numbers. I am pleased to say that we now have a new secondary school and three new primary schools, which have gone in relatively recently to catch up with the backlog in the provision of places for this very fast-growing part of the country. That creates its own financial problems, however, which the Minister and his system do not recognise. First, there is a delay in getting the money in for the new schools as the provision goes in, so the budgets of the other schools are squeezed.

Secondly, when we at last get a new secondary school, for example, it makes a lot of places available all in one go, because it establishes itself with a certain capacity, and then pupils are attracted to that school—perfectly reasonably—and are taken away from other schools, and those schools then face an immediate cut in the amount of money they have, because suddenly they do not have the right number of pupils to sustain the budgets. It takes time to slim down their offer, and sometimes it is very painful and difficult, but again the system is simply too inflexible to recognise this basic requirement of the system.

If it means that we have a few more places to give parents more choice, that is good, but I am a realist—you have to pay for it, Minister. We expect the Minister to do so, representing as he does a Government who say they believe in parental choice and high standards for pupils in state schools. That is something the Minister and I entirely agree about. If I am ever tempted to give a talk to or visit an independent school, and if I go to the really well-endowed ones, I see a different world in terms of the library resources, the range of curriculum offers, the sporting facilities and the support they get—because money does buy something better. I want the pupils who go to state schools in West Berkshire and Wokingham to have access to the best, but we simply cannot do that on the current budget.

Minister, the Government should stop trying to give £39 billion to the European Union to delay our exit for two to four years, when the public voted to get out. Let us get hold of the money, Minister, and put it where it matters: into social care and schools and into tax cuts for hard-pressed families so they can provide more for their own children. That is what the public want. Get on with it, Minister!

2.47 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): On 4 March, I had the great privilege to move the motion in Westminster Hall on e-petition 232220 on schools funding. The debate was packed and lively, as we heard earlier, with many hon. Members sharing the difficulties their local schools were facing due to insufficient funding.

It was a particular privilege for me because the petition was started by Mr Andrew Ramanandi, the headteacher of St Joseph's Primary School in Blaydon, and signed by over 3,300 people from my constituency and other parts of the country. It was built on a campaign that started with a letter co-signed by headteachers of primary, secondary and SEND schools in Gateshead who had become increasingly alarmed by the impact that a real-terms reduction in schools funding was having on the children and young people in their care. The letter, which was sent to parents before Christmas and informed them that schools may no longer be able to provide the same level of education, asked them for their support in raising their concerns with the Government.

Seventy-one out of 76 schools in Gateshead borough are facing real-terms reductions in funding. At the same time, costs—as we have heard—are rising, and so are pupil numbers in Gateshead, as elsewhere in the country. The Government's own statistics show that England's schools have 137,000 more pupils in the system and the Institute for Fiscal Studies acknowledged that schools have suffered an 8% real-terms reduction in spending per pupil despite growing numbers of pupils coming through the doors. With increasing numbers of pupils and decreasing funding in real terms, schools have had to make cuts in staffing as well as in all budget areas, looking for greater efficiencies in supplies and services. Headteachers in my constituency tell me that, as funding has become tighter, schools have had to cut back on essential resources—teaching and non-teaching staff, support staff who work with vulnerable pupils, small group work and interventions with children who are not thriving, teaching resources, subject choices, classroom and extracurricular activities, repairs to buildings and renewal of equipment.

In preparation for the debate, I visited several schools across Blaydon. At one of them, Portobello Primary School in Birtley, the headteacher and governors of that great community school talked to me about their concerns about funding pressures. They told me that in the last year they have lost four valuable members of staff to redundancy, including a higher level teaching assistant with 20 years' experience in early years; an experienced teacher who led on the arts curriculum; a highly skilled teaching assistant trained in supporting children with medical and educational needs; and a dedicated school counsellor who supported young children with their mental health. They also said that the impact of real-terms budget reductions has made it harder to deliver specific interventions with pupils; it is increasingly difficult to provide the personal and emotional support for vulnerable pupils; they have lost decades' worth of experience and curriculum knowledge; and they are finding it harder and harder to take children on educational visits and to purchase up-to-date teaching resources and equipment.

I mentioned Mr Andrew Ramanandi of St Joseph's Primary School, where the children are bright, interested and have clearly been taught to have inquiring minds.

He told me that the day after the recent debate he had to tell his staff about the outcome of the redundancy consultation he had to carry out. I caught up with him earlier this week to find out about what happened. He told me that 19 morning sessions and four afternoon sessions now have no learning support in the classroom. He has had to lose a day's PPA cover by a qualified teacher who can deliver specialist curriculum. He has had to stop whole class brass and percussion music lessons. The school is oversubscribed so it is not about fewer pupils: it is that the school has had to bear the brunt of inflation and increased on-costs. Mr Ramanandi said that they are expecting an Ofsted inspection from September onwards under the new framework, which will be looking at the quality of curriculum. However, due to funding problems, he has had to make decisions on redundancies and spending that will potentially stop the school from being outstanding.

I could go on, but I will finish by saying that headteachers, teachers, parents and governors across Blaydon all want the Minister to provide higher funding—fair funding—for schools, for our children and young people and so do I. I hope that the Minister will be able today, almost eight weeks after the Westminster Hall debate, to give us all that assurance.

2.52 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today.

Investment in education is one of my priorities for North Cornwall and of special interest to me personally as a champion of social mobility. North Cornwall is a prime example of an area that has been historically overlooked compared with urban areas by Governments of all colours over the past 50 years, to the detriment of the life chances of children and young people who grow up in that beautiful part of the country.

The London challenge policy saw a huge investment in urban areas in 2003. Although it is difficult to isolate the impact of the policy, it is undeniable that attainment levels went up when the overall funding packages were introduced in those areas. The policy saw a budget of £40 million a year for London, Greater Manchester and the Black Country at its peak. My issue is that the children of Lanivet, Launceston and Bodmin could and should have had the same resources at the same time, and would have benefited from the uplift.

I mention the London challenge because despite the policy coming to an end there is still a huge disparity between education investment in urban and in rural areas. Cornwall is part of a group of 42 local authorities that have historically received some of the lowest allocations for primary and secondary pupils across the country. I am taking part in this debate on behalf of some of the headteachers who have spoken to me about their concerns.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the London challenge. It was a very successful investment, but its legacy is the huge gap in per capita funding for pupils in our constituencies. Does he agree that coastal constituencies such as his and mine, where there are pockets of deprivation, need a similar scheme to recognise the deprivation alongside the advantage, just as happened in London, but in a different way?

Scott Mann: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Rural deprivation is very much harder to differentiate. Urban deprivation tends to be easier to identify. Rural deprivation definitely exists and should be recognised in the funding formula.

Cornwall is one of the most beautiful places to raise a child. It is safe and has a uniquely beautiful landscape. Children are really lucky to grow up there. However, I believe that, when it comes to education, they have been short-changed over the years. Having been a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Treasury, I understand the cost pressures of maintaining stable economic policy, ensuring stable growth and limiting borrowing, allowing us to live within our means, but if there is one sector that needs urgent investment and a spending review, Minister, it is your Department—further education, secondary education and primary education. That means revisiting some of the policies that we have looked at previously: the minimum per pupil funding levels, the 0.5% funding floor and the historic differences for the schools that have been comparatively well-funded over several decades. Moreover, there is an issue with the use of historic averages, which locks in the disparity gap between the highest-funded and lowest-funded state schools, which can be between 50% and 70%. Cornwall's schools are particularly penalised, which is unfair.

For me, it is simply a question of fairness—fairness for taxpayers, fairness for teachers, and fairness for children and young people. Parents in North Cornwall pay the same level of tax pro rata as parents in cities, yet historically their children have received only half the educational investment from the state that pupils in urban areas have. Although the fair funding mechanisms have helped, the rebalancing is not happening fast enough; it needs to happen much faster.

As I mentioned, one of my passions, which pushed me to stand for election, is social mobility. More parity and fairness in the education system will allow social mobility to increase in North Cornwall. I cannot stand here and argue for social mobility while that disparity exists. More investment leads to higher attainment and provides teachers with the resources they need to teach their pupils. With the extra funding that went into London, with the larger budgets, those attainment gaps shrank. In an increasingly technologically based jobs market, rural pupils need to have the same level of funding to obtain the same level of skills needed to fit into that marketplace. They need to be given the fairest deal they can from this Government to develop their academic and vocational skills. North Cornwall's pupils are no less talented, aspirational, ambitious or intelligent than pupils from urban areas, but they have historically received less funding from every colour of Government in the last 50 years. That needs to change. We need a fairer national funding formula that is not based on disparity between urban and rural areas, but unlocks the talent of every child in this country.

On behalf of schools in North Cornwall, I am asking for a fairer deal, Minister; and to show confidence in our young people in North Cornwall it is a question of not simply more investment after years of sustained economic and budgetary growth, but a reallocation of funds across the whole area, ensuring that every pupil, no matter where they live, from Cornwall to Scotland and everywhere in between, is treated in exactly the same way.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that schools in rural areas such as mine should get a fairer deal in the spending review. I urge the Minister to strengthen every sinew when he speaks to the Treasury.

2.57 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), not least because I was the Minister for Schools when we introduced the London challenge. It is worth reminding the House that, prior to the London challenge, the performance of London schools was below the national average, even though their funding was above the national average—so the improvement was not simply a consequence of the London challenge. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to speak up for rural and coastal schools. The suggestion of a coastal challenge, similar to the London challenge, is welcome and I would be delighted to support it.

Investment in education is crucial for social justice, for tackling inequality and poverty and, of course, for our national economic future. When Labour took office in 1997, UK public spending on education as a proportion of GDP was at its lowest since the early 1960s; we lagged behind many European neighbours and other advanced economies. By 2010 we had overtaken key countries such as Germany, Switzerland and Australia, delivering real change with smaller classes, modern school buildings, higher per pupil funding and a big increase in the numbers of teachers and support staff. Yet since 2010, that progress has been reversed. Education spending as a share of national income has fallen from 5.8% to 4.3%. That is a shocking decline in our national investment in education.

In Liverpool, the council expects 16 schools that are currently in surplus to go into deficit and 24 schools to go further into deficit. Despite the funding challenges that schools across my constituency face, the situation would be much worse if it were not for the pupil premium. The pupil premium was a welcome initiative introduced by the coalition, aimed at improving opportunities for children from the poorest backgrounds. However, headteachers are increasingly saying to me and to other Members, as we have heard today, that they have no alternative but to use pupil premium cash to offset budget cuts elsewhere.

The head of St Margaret's Anfield Church of England Primary School told me this week:

"without pupil premium I would be unable to deliver an effective curriculum and a safe working environment."

I am particularly concerned that the children who most need extra support are bearing the brunt of changes. The head of St Paul and St Timothy's Catholic Infant School told me:

"it is the most vulnerable children in our schools who are suffering the most as a result of this funding crisis."

I want to echo what the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) said about high-needs funding. According to analysis by the Institute for Public Policy Research, in north-west England, funding per eligible child through the high-needs block has fallen in the last five years by 24%—a quarter of the funding cut. Liverpool forecasts a budget deficit in that block of more than £3 million.

[Stephen Twigg]

Bank View High School, a great special school in my constituency for students with complex learning difficulties, has seen an increase in its pupil numbers from 160 to 200. Next door is Redbridge High School, which caters for children with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning disabilities. It has also experienced an increasing number of pupils, yet it does not have the funding to match the demand. The head tells me that, as a result, the school has had to make cuts.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that a fundamental point, which I have raised with the Minister on a number of occasions, is that too much of the funding does not reach the schools but gets stuck somewhere on the way? We have to make sure that the funding is in the schools.

Stephen Twigg: I absolutely agree.

Despite the challenging environment that Bank View and Redbridge schools face, I am delighted that have they have again been ranked outstanding by Ofsted. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate both schools on that fantastic achievement.

Schools in Liverpool are highly dependent on the minimum funding guarantee, but that has not been confirmed beyond 2020-21. As the Chair of the Education Committee rightly said, schools need long-term certainty. Another headteacher has raised the issue of having to put forward three-year budget plans without confirmation of future funding arrangements due to the delay in the comprehensive spending review. Surely the message of this debate is that education deserves the same kind of long-term planning that we see for our health system.

I thank all the teachers and support staff who work so hard and go above and beyond. The headteacher of Clifford Holroyde School, Jane Pepa, said to me:

“I have spent large amounts of my time seeing how we can do more with less, applying for grants to keep us afloat and even selling Christmas trees to try to generate funding.”

The burden should not be on headteachers such as Jane to do that. As the Government expect more from our schools, they need to back that up with significant increases in funding and resources. We need a serious, long-term settlement for schools funding.

3.3 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Primary and secondary schools across my constituency provide a commendably high standard of education. In the Cheshire East local authority area, 87% of children now attend schools rated good or outstanding, compared with 73% in 2010. Of course, much of the credit for that goes to dedicated staff in schools and strong leadership by headteachers, but as Education Ministers will know from a dialogue we have been having for some years, those same headteachers say that that is in spite of acute funding pressures.

To be fair, I want to thank Education Ministers and the Minister for School Standards in particular for having listening ears. Two years ago, they raised per-pupil funding in senior schools to £4,800, which was the exact amount that headteachers in my constituency requested. Total funding for Cheshire East schools is rising by £10.4 million over 2018-20, but that figure factors in increased pupil numbers, which are disproportionately

high, due to the high number of new house builds. Yes, an additional £1.6 million of high needs funding has been added for the same two years, but this is woefully insufficient to meet current additional needs, causing distress, as I have seen in my surgeries, to parents, pupils and teachers. Yes, an additional £3.8 million of funding has been added through the growth, premises and mobility factors of the national funding formula in 2019-20, and an additional £10.4 million of pupil premium funding will be received by schools as a result of that having been introduced, as we have heard, by the coalition Government. I recognise all this, but headteachers repeatedly tell me that they simply cannot provide the level of education they aspire to due to funding pressures. One wrote to me:

“The parlous funding situation which envelops us is a depressingly serious threat to the breadth, range and quality of education that we are able to offer.”

I want to thank the Secretary of State for Education for writing to me just last week, acknowledging that

“I very much recognise the financial constraints that schools face.”

He added that

“there is clearly much more still to do.”

I hope Ministers will take away from this debate the points raised by colleagues across the House. If the spending review is the key determinant of spending for the Government, I hope this debate will strengthen Education Ministers’ arms—because I do believe that they have listening ears—in setting out a strong case for much improved education funding, and will open the Treasury’s eyes and ears to what is being said in this Chamber today. In one of the debates on this subject in which I spoke not long ago—it was about eight weeks ago in Westminster Hall—I said, very politely and courteously, that we actually had the wrong Minister in front of us, and I still think that that is the case today. We need a Treasury Minister in front of us, and perhaps we need to think about a creative title for a debate on school funding that will ensure that happens.

In closing, may I raise the three points that headteacher Ed O’Neill of Eaton Bank Academy wrote to me about? Following another debate—a Westminster Hall debate—I spoke in, he wanted to comment on three issues arising from the Minister’s response to that debate. First, he said the Minister made

“no mention of the ludicrous situation of ‘short termism’ in financial planning.”

We have heard about this already in the Chamber today. He went on:

“This position is untenable for schools. As school leaders we need to have a greater degree of certainty over the longer term health of school finances so that we can budget and plan accordingly.”

Secondly, he said:

“No matter what the over-arching increase that is quoted from the DfE, the funding is not good enough. From a secondary school perspective, the variance between KS3 and KS4...weightings needs changing. It is no less challenging to provide for a student aged 11-14 than...for a student aged 14-16”

and

“the allocation to KS3 pupils...needs to be significantly improved.”

Thirdly, he said:

“The poor funding for post 16 students is crippling provision and opportunity.”

He also said that

“post 16 education is desperately underfunded. Added to the additional and historic financial underfunding pressures schools in Cheshire East face, school Sixth Forms are struggling to

maintain viability. It is a very real possibility that schools across the...Borough will fairly quickly be forced to start closing down their Sixth Form provision."

3.8 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Our schools are facing a crisis in funding, and unless immediate action is taken, irreversible damage will be done to our children's education. In the Westminster Hall debate on school funding on 4 March, the Minister for School Standards regaled us with how much money the Government had given to schools on a per-pupil basis and suggested that the Department for Education helps schools to make savings on non-staffing spend and advertising vacancies, but this fundamentally fails to understand the problem.

The Minister is ignoring the hard facts that schools face on the ground. The additional costs that schools are facing for energy, increases in national insurance contributions, pension obligations, pay rises and the apprenticeship levy—the last four are directly the effect of Government policy—mean that any additional funding schools may receive goes nowhere near covering what schools have had taken from them. It is like pouring a cup of water into a bucket having previously drilled three large holes in the bottom. In addition, the new school funding formula means that some schools are losing out, and if the Minister does not believe me, he should listen to the headteachers.

Kate Baptiste, headteacher of St Monica's Catholic Primary School in my constituency, told me:

"we are currently facing a deficit of just over £130,000. This is going to mean drastic cuts to staffing...We will lose support staff as well. This in turn will affect standards...High needs funding is also dire. We do not receive the full funding for children with an Education, Health and Care Plan...we do not receive the first £6,000 for each plan..."

At St Michael at Bowes Church of England Junior School in my constituency—the school I attended as a child and where I am a governor—headteacher Maria Jay and the governors are looking at making changes to the school day because the dedicated schools grant has not increased, and per-pupil funding has not increased in line with inflation. There have also been significant increases in pension and national insurance contributions.

The National Education Union has provided me with statistics from the Department for Education that show that the annual funding shortfall for schools in Enfield Southgate between 2015-2016 and 2018-2019 was £4,154,554, or a 7% cut. It is not only schools in my constituency that are affected. Two headteachers from schools in Hertfordshire also contacted me about school funding cuts in their area. Gillian Langan, headteacher of Abel Smith School, and Justine Page, headteacher of St Joseph's Catholic Primary School in Hertford, contacted me and said:

"In spite of the persistent and heroic efforts of school staff, these are desperate times and the funding crisis means that children's needs are no longer being met. Delivering an intense, academic National Curriculum at a time when teacher recruitment and retention is in crisis has undermined children's mental health and exploited children with special educational needs. This critical issue cannot be resolved without giving headteachers adequate funding that is ring fenced so that it goes directly into the classroom to provide urgently needed human and practical resources e.g. teachers, support staff and modern technology."

In research published last week, the Sutton Trust found that 69% of schools had to cut staff to save money, and that is on top of the fact that the UK is

facing a major issue with teacher recruitment and retention. Teach First's report, "Britain at a crossroads: what will it take to provide the teachers our children need?" states that currently one teacher is leaving the profession for every one that joins. We cannot afford to cut the numbers of the teachers we have. It is estimated that we will need an extra 47,000 secondary teachers and 8,000 primary teachers by 2024, just to maintain current pupil-teacher ratios. Teachers in more disadvantaged areas are over 70% more likely to leave than those in affluent areas. Between 2017 and 2027, the number of secondary school pupils is expected to grow by 15%, which means there will be 418,000 pupils in secondary schools by 2027. Unless more substantial investment goes into our schools, and soon, our school education system will fall apart.

Schools must have the resources to be modern workplaces that continue to develop employees throughout their careers, while allowing life beyond work. A vital part of that will be reducing overall workload, and paying teachers a salary that reflects their efforts, qualifications, and role in preparing the coming generations for life beyond school. In conclusion, I ask the Minister to look at the facts, and to meet me and headteachers from my local schools and go through their budgets. He should see with his own eyes the scale of the problem faced by schools, and take the urgent action needed to stop this crisis and fix the holes in the bucket.

3.13 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate. It is not the first time she has persisted in raising this issue. I intended to make some of these points during the debate on school funding on 4 March, but I was delayed and could not attend the opening speeches in Westminster Hall. Once I arrived I found that no seats were available and I could not even get in to sit down. The attendance of so many Members at that debate, and indeed on a Thursday afternoon, is testament to the concern that the issue of school funding is causing to so many of us and our communities.

I have raised this point with the Department before but it is worth repeating. More money has been invested in schools to promote standards, but the amount per pupil has declined because of the increased number of pupils on roll. In England, school block allocations per pupil have declined. In 2013-14 that allocation was £4,934 per pupil, but by 2018-19 that had declined to £4,694. As has been said, a report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies stated that real-terms funding for schools will have fallen by 6.5% between 2015 and 2020—the biggest fall in the past 30 years. In the London Borough of Barnet, in which the Hendon constituency is located, school block allocations per pupil have declined each year from £5,355 in 2013-14 to £4,887 in the last financial year.

Recently, I visited Cophthall School for girls in Mill Hill. Three years ago it was a failing school, but with the introduction of a new headteacher and many new staff it has achieved a rapid transformation and been judged as good by Ofsted. Cophthall is a science, technology, engineering, and maths—STEM—school. Very recently, year 11 pupils took part in a live operating theatre event where the girls were able to treat artificial cadavers and even operated on pigs' hearts and other organs to gain a lifelike experience of surgery, with a view to a medical career. That greatly impressed me. In some schools, such an

[Dr Matthew Offord]

event may be of little significance, but it was of huge significance for this school considering the social background of the pupils. More than half receive free school meals, English is the second language for 70% of the girls, and 80% are from an ethnic minority background.

However, the school faces difficult financial challenges. Copthall School's per pupil premium grant was £362,780 two years ago, but that was reduced to £359,957 last year. That is a real-terms decrease and a real problem for the finance committee. Total funding in 2018 was £6,309,710, but that is down £264,500 from the previous year. The school needs a new roof and a new heating system. The combined cost would be over £1 million. The school applied to Barnet Council for a funding grant, but was not successful. Even though it is a STEM school, its science laboratories are "woefully out of date", its IT equipment is dated and its library is passed its best. It is not the only school in my constituency having problems, but I raise the particular issues it is experiencing having recently spoken to Evelyn Forde, the headteacher, and Julia Blackman, the chairman of governors.

In the "Improving Education Standards" debate on 29 November, I acknowledged that the Government have increased the amount of money put into our nation's schools, but I also raised the issue of the increasing numbers of pupils being taught. That brings me back to the point being made by headteachers in my constituency that in real terms per-pupil funding has fallen. Planned savings by Barnet council have led to concerns from many headteachers in the Hendon constituency about the sustainability of their schools. Pressures include: increased pension and insurance costs, along with a pay rise for teachers; and cuts to special needs support, including therapy or inclusion services. That has led to some schools having to take various measures, including cutting staff, reducing the curriculum, increasing class sizes and not replacing equipment. And of course, the high cost of living in the borough makes it hard to attract staff. I have pointed that out repeatedly to the Department and have asked for the formula to be changed in relation to inner and outer-London boroughs.

In conclusion, I repeat the request from my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for Ministers to use the forthcoming comprehensive spending review to make strong representations to the Chancellor and the Treasury. At the general election, much heat was created in constituencies such as Hendon in relation to education funding. I hope that we can address this concern before it becomes untenable to teach children in our schools.

3.18 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Our schools are under pressure, the like of which has not been seen for decades. In Oldham, we have taken more than our fair share of cuts. I want to use this opportunity to place on record my own thanks to teachers and support staff for the hard work and dedication they show every day in very difficult circumstances. But the cracks are clear, and many teachers, parents and children just cannot take any more.

We have an important opportunity to invest in young people, so they can progress and achieve their full potential, so they can be treated as individuals, and for

teaching and learning to be formed around their needs to set them on the path to a positive and productive life with an open outlook, confident in their place in the world, and with a determination to change it for the better. These are high stakes.

For too many, that is not the experience of pupils and parents in Oldham West and Royton. Since 2015, our town has seen cuts in excess of £32 million, with an average loss per pupil of £320. That money is impacting directly on teaching and learning, and on the special educational needs and disability and specialist support provision our students desperately need. The results of the cuts are clear to see. Oldham now has fewer teachers. According to the Government's own school workforce data, we have lost 100 teachers, while the number of pupils has increased by a third—more than 8,700—since 2010. The numbers simply do not add up. It is not difficult to see why students are struggling, parents are frustrated, and many teachers are leaving the profession because they cannot take the strain. The present situation is not fair on anyone involved in the system.

Our schools have not received the golden gift that the Government would have us believe they are offering. To add insult to injury, Oldham is meant to be one of the opportunity areas that they say need additional resources and additional focus. So much so, in fact, that the Minister for School Standards—who is in the Chamber—decided to return to the scene of the crime, and, a short while ago, visited Yew Tree Primary School in Chadderton. I should be embarrassed if I were in the Minister's position. Yew Tree primary has suffered a cut of £659 per pupil, but he thought it fitting to go there and talk about what a wonderful job the Government are doing to support schools. The brass neck on that Minister! However, Yew Tree primary is not the only school in such circumstances. Oldham Academy North has seen a cut of £672 per pupil, and at Holy Family in Limeside and Stanley Road primary there have been cuts of £517 and £439 per pupil respectively.

While there are many good examples of good teaching and learning, the fact is that there are secondary schools which are failing to provide a basic standard of education. I entirely support the staff and the work that they are doing, but it is also right for me to give parents a voice when they do not feel that they have access to a good or outstanding school for their children. More than 75% of secondary school students in the Hollinwood ward do not have access to a good or outstanding school; in Royton South the figure is 30%, and in Medlock Vale it is 25%.

We have fewer teachers and more pupils, experienced staff are leaving the profession, and the school system has been fragmented by academisation, free schools, university technical colleges, and all the other pet projects. We are told that there is no money, but there was money enough for £14 million to be found for a failed UTC and £4 million for the failed Collective Spirit free school. Both those schools, incidentally, have got away without a single examination of what really went on with their finances. There is money for pet projects, but there is no money for the basic provision of education in our schools.

Enough is enough. We have heard, across parties, about the frustration that is being felt. There is unity throughout the Chamber: everyone thinks that our young people deserve better and our teachers deserve better.

Now is the time to provide the money that will deliver decent education. It does not have to be this way. At the end of January there was a tax surplus of some £14 billion, £5.8 billion higher than last year's. The money is in the coffers, and there has been a deliberate choice not to use it. That is a scandal.

3.23 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): In the limited time that I have, I shall focus on the issue of high-needs funding. The high-needs pot funds children with special educational needs and disabilities in both mainstream and special schools. While it is true that funding has increased, the high-needs landscape in our schools has fundamentally changed. Demand has gone up, and there has been an explosion in pupil complexity. Teachers nowadays are dealing with a landscape that is wholly different from the one that existed even as recently as 10 years ago.

When I visit schools in Cheltenham—whether they are mainstream schools like Balcarras or special schools like Belmont, Bettridge, The Ridge Academy and Battledown Centre—the same message is received time and time again. The present cohort of pupils, through no fault of their own, are far more complex and have a far greater variety of needs than ever before. Indeed, that was the message that came from Peter Hales when he met the Minister, to whom I am extremely grateful for listening so attentively and with such evident concern at the meeting earlier this week.

It is fascinating to speak to teachers who have been in post for 20 years. They say that 20 years ago in a school like—for instance—The Ridge Academy, which deals with children with behavioural or emotional problems, it might have been possible for one teacher to teach a class of 15 pupils because that would have been sufficient to deal with the level of complexity, but nowadays it would be completely inadequate.

I will give one small example. The headteacher told me that increasingly he is seeing children in his classroom exhibit symptoms of what can only be described as an acute mental health crisis, which was hitherto unknown. What are teachers supposed to do in that situation? Do they take the child to A&E, which might not be the right place for them, and takes resources out of the school? Do they try to deal with the situation themselves, although often they feel that they do not have the necessary skillset for that?

The reasons for that increasing complexity are not necessarily clear. Some people cite the fact that, mercifully, there are children surviving childbirth who might not have done so 10 years ago—thank goodness for the marvels of modern medicine. Others point to issues of social breakdown. Others even point to social media. In the fullness of time we will need to have an inquiry into why we are seeing these greater levels of complexity. Regardless of the causes, however, the symptoms are crystal clear, and the fact is that our schools are struggling to deal with them. I pay tribute to the teachers in my schools, who are doing a genuinely heroic job trying to deal with some of these issues.

What are the solutions? I think that funding will need to be part of it. The high-needs block is of the order of £6 billion, and one of the reasons why people like me are so keen to see the Brexit issue resolved is that we know the Government are holding back money, quite

properly, to deal with contingencies that might arise from a disorderly Brexit. Some people say that figure is in the region of £15 billion to £20 billion, so releasing just a proportion of it could have a dramatic impact on a £6 billion budget.

The second proposal, which I commend to the Minister, is to give these schools a facility that would allow them, when a pupil is having an acute mental health crisis, to pick up the phone and be assured that someone will come to assist. Even if that resource was just one or two people who were shared across the whole town, between Belmont School, Bettridge School and The Ridge Academy, perhaps funded by the clinical commissioning group, it would be enormously helpful. It would allow the schools to deal with problems in a way that is proportionate, effective for the individual and would not have knock-on implications at A&E. Yes, it would have a cost, but it would not be fanciful or unrealistic.

My final point is that if we are to ease the pressure on special schools, it is critical that mainstream schools are encouraged to do what they can to deal with children with SEN statements. That complexity is increasingly exhibited in mainstream schools, and they need to be incentivised to look after those children as much as possible. One of the perverse incentives is that they must pay the first £6,000 themselves, so I invite the Government to look at that again. I hope that more funding will be made available in the spending review in due course, because it is urgently required in Cheltenham.

3.28 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Government keep telling us that more money than ever before is going to schools, but they ignore the reality on the ground. Today I want to unpick one number that they have used to justify their position, because it simply does not stand up to scrutiny. Shortly after the 2017 general election the Government announced an extra £1.3 billion. According to Survation, a full three quarters of a million people changed the party they voted for in 2017 because of the school funding emergency. The Government had to respond, but they misheard us—we said “More money,” not “Move money.”

That £1.3 billion was not new money. Some £315 million was taken out of a fund for new PE facilities, and the Government passed the bill for 30 new schools on to cash-strapped local authorities. The Government raided the new money from the capital budget while the National Audit Office estimates that it will cost £6.7 billion just to return all school buildings to a satisfactory condition. Newbridge Primary School in Bath has fallen foul of that raid. Children are being taught in buildings with leaky roofs, and they play on playing fields surrounded by crumbling walls. At a meeting I secured with a Minister, the school was told to look for a cheaper ground maintenance contractor.

Meanwhile, the so-called new money did nothing to reverse the real-terms cuts to per-pupil funding between 2015 and 2017. Today, 91% of schools have less money per pupil in real terms than they did in 2015. In my constituency, schools have seen their per-pupil funding cut by £213 in real terms since 2015.

The reason this angers me so much is that our schools funding emergency is a political choice. The latest estimate from the National Education Union is that it would cost about £2.2 billion to bring the main three blocks of the national funding formula back up to 2015 levels.

[Wera Hobhouse]

Instead, the Government have spent more than half that money on increasing the higher rate threshold for income tax, so that people like us here in Parliament get a tax cut of more than £500 per year, even though we Lib Dems voted against the tax cuts for ourselves. This just goes to show the very wrong choices that this Government are making. The Liberal Democrats committed to reversing school cuts at the last general election and we will do so again at the next one, but the longer the Government wait, the more teachers and parents will vote with their feet and they will probably do so in the local elections on 2 May.

I want to make one special plea today, and it is one that has been echoed across the Chamber. The Government must provide an immediate funding boost for pupils with special educational needs. They are on the front-line of our schools funding emergency. The high-needs budget is not keeping up with the rise in SEND pupil numbers. In Bath and North East Somerset, the high-needs budget is worth about £21,000 for each child with an education, health and care plan, but that is £1,600 less in real terms than in 2015. We are more than £1.8 million short of what we need just to tread water, and this is for children with the most complex special needs. Support for those who do not meet the threshold for an EHCP must be paid out of the squeezed local authority schools budget.

The Minister must consider providing additional money in the national funding formula to cover some of the costs that schools are currently paying—usually £6,000—as their contribution towards an education, health and care plan. That way, we could free up schools' budgets to provide in-school support for children with additional needs who do not usually qualify for an EHCP, such as pupils with dyslexia or high-functioning autism. I urge the Government to end this funding emergency, so that schools and colleges, and particularly pupils with SEND, can have the money that they so desperately need and deserve.

3.32 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I should like to start by correcting a misunderstanding about my question to the Prime Minister during PMQs on 13 March. After letters and meetings with local headteachers, I asked why the Secretary of State had failed to meet a group of Kent headteachers about school cuts. They wrote to me as part of the Coastal Alliance Co-operative Trust. However, following investigations by my office and the office of the Secretary of State, it appears that a different group, called the WorthLess? campaign, had requested those meetings, and it has now met officials from the Department. This wider campaigning body represents a much larger number of concerned school leaders nationally. So I apologise if my original form of words was inaccurate or misleading. This was most definitely not intended by myself, by the group of headteachers who originally wrote to me or by their pupils' parents. Moreover, I sincerely hope that this misunderstanding will not deter the Secretary of State from taking up my invitation to meet my hard-working headteachers to discuss school funding ahead of the comprehensive spending review. The invitation still very much stands, and he would be very welcome to visit those schools in my constituency.

I would like to talk about the very real struggle faced by those and other headteachers every single day as they are forced to make yet more cuts and to cut yet more staff and resources. Schools are having to provide services that were previously provided by other agencies, yet the flawed and widely criticised national funding formula does not make that possible. Huge differences in per-pupil funding remain in place across the country, and to date, no positive difference has been made to the majority of schools in my constituency. In fact, according to the Library, the total schools block allocation for Canterbury has fallen 6.4% in real terms over the past five years, compared with 4.8% for England nationally.

I hear time and again from local headteachers about how hard it is to plan ahead when their funding cycle remains wedded to processes at Her Majesty's Treasury. As we heard from the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), this Government have provided NHS managers with a long-term plan, so why can we not afford the same degree of mid-to-long-term policy stability for our headteachers, too?

A member of the Kent Association of Headteachers wrote to me a few days ago and said:

“Since 2010, schools with pupils aged 5-16 have received an 8% real-terms cut in funding. The figure is 20% post-16. Against this background, headteachers across Kent remain extremely concerned that the Secretary of State and Minister for Schools continue to underplay the devastating impact that the ongoing funding crisis is having upon our provision and capacity to meet the needs of children and families.”

Others have also pointed out the considerable evidence to challenge the Minister's assertion that real-terms cuts have ended since the introduction of the national funding formula in April 2018. The independent Education Policy Institute has stated that over 50% of maintained schools and academies are now spending more than their annual revenue.

Over 1,000 councillors from across the country recently wrote to the Secretary of State demanding adequate funding for schools to support high-needs pupils and those requiring SEND provision. Every Member of this House will have parents, grandparents and carers crying in their weekly surgeries as they face a desperate battle to get proper provision for their children. Social care, emotional wellbeing, and speech and language services have all been cut. PE lessons, sports equipment, the teaching of arts and drama, and the chance to add fun to children's lives have all but disappeared.

I left the classroom in 2016. While my new job is incredibly stressful at times and has many pressures, the pressures faced by teachers, support staff and headteachers are becoming intolerable. The welfare of vulnerable children in a time of shocking child poverty is left to the heroes who work in our schools. They are overworked, underpaid and dipping into their own modest pay packets to look after, feed and help children, when that should be the duty of the state.

3.37 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Stephen Yaxley-Lennon or Tommy Robinson, as he is known, is currently holding an event in my constituency, and I want to make it clear—I am sure the whole House will agree—that this individual is not welcome to spread his xenophobic, Islamophobic, homophobic, racist vitriol in my community or any other. He seeks to divide rather than unite, but we do things differently in Manchester. We stand together against hate.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing this debate and the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for starting off with a powerful speech. She talked about billions being spent on Brexit rather than education and about a deep-rooted, systemic problem with funding in the system. The whole House has been united in discussing the problem of school funding. There is no party political divide anymore, because everyone on both sides is worried. Things must change.

After what we have heard today, we can be in no doubt about the impact on our schools of this Government's continued austerity. The situation is shocking. The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Education Secretary have both stated in the House that every school in England would see a cash-terms increase in funding, yet that flies in the face of reality and what we have heard today. On top of the funding cuts that schools have experienced, which I will outline later, our schools are having to plug the gaps in local government, healthcare and many other services. SEND and mental health services have been shattered. Some teachers have had to take it upon themselves to take children to A&E, which is outrageous in this day and age.

Local authorities face an overall funding gap of over £3 billion next year, rising to £8 billion by 2025. By 2020, their core funding will have been cut by nearly £16 billion since 2010. Figures compiled by the Labour party show that, in 2017-18, local authorities spent more than £800 million over budget on children's services and social care due to growing demand and, as a result, were forced to make cuts elsewhere and to draw on reserves. This is having a dramatic impact on the level and type of services that councils across our great country can provide.

Many councils now spend less on early intervention, and youth services across the country have been devastated. On top of this, our schools are experiencing cuts across the board. Since 2015, the Government have cut £2.7 billion from school budgets in England. Despite the claim of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that no child will lose their free school meal eligibility, the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that 160,000 children—one in eight on the legacy system—will not be eligible under universal credit.

The Government's own data shows that, as of January 2018, more than 4,000 children and young people with an education, health and care plan or statement were awaiting provision—in other words, they were waiting for a place in education.

Over half a million children are now in supersize classes. There is an unquestionable recruitment crisis in our schools, with the Government now having missed their own recruitment targets for five years in a row. For the second year running, there are now more teachers leaving the profession than joining it.

There is a crisis in our schools to which this Government are turning a blind eye. In fact, there has been a concerted effort by the Government to fudge the figures and deflect attention away from the cuts to school funding over which they have presided. According to data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the reality is that school budgets are lower in real terms than they were five years ago.

To add insult to injury, we have had the Chancellor's £400 million for "little extras," which is an insult to teachers, schools and children who have faced year after

year of austerity. The fact is that, across the country, schools are having to write home to parents to ask for money to buy basic resources. They do not need money for little extras; they need it for the essentials.

If funding per pupil had been maintained in value since 2015, school funding overall would be £5.1 billion higher than it is today, and 91% of schools are still facing real-terms budget cuts, despite any reallocation of the funding formula. Members present already know all too well the impact on the ground, and as has already been expressed in the debate, headteachers and parents are telling us about it almost daily.

The average shortfall is more than £67,000 in primary schools, and more than £273,000 in secondary schools. Our schools have 137,000 more pupils but 5,400 fewer teachers, 2,800 fewer teaching assistants, 1,400 fewer support staff and 1,200 fewer auxiliary staff. The Government need to stop their sticking-plaster approach to school finances and give schools the funding they really need.

Sadly, it is clear that austerity is not over for our schools. When will the Minister remove his head from the sand and truly begin to hear the voices of schools, teachers, parents and Members on both sides of the House? I have spent far too many hours on the Floor of the House, along with my colleagues on the shadow Front Bench and right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, trying to get the Government to face the facts and act.

It beggars belief that the Government have ignored the School Teachers Review Body's recommendation of an across-the-board 3.5% increase to all pay and allowances and are now calling for it to be capped at 2%—the first time that has happened in the body's 28-year history. To make matters worse, the Government expect schools to meet the cost of the first percentage point of the pay award from existing budgets, which have already been cut to the bone.

With the economic uncertainty of Brexit and the challenges it will bring, to have a Government who are failing to invest in education and skills defies all logic. As a former primary school teacher, I know the difference a good teacher makes. With the right support and resources, they can raise a child's attainment and aspiration. We go into teaching because we believe in the value of education. We believe in its power to create social mobility, as the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) said. We believe in its ability to create ambition for all. This is about our children's future and the future of our country. Our schools need fair funding, and they need it now.

3.45 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Let me start by saying that I share the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) about Stephen Yaxley-Lennon's visit to his constituency today, and I am sure they are shared right across this House.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing and opening this important debate. The Government are determined to create a world-class education system that offers opportunity to every child, no matter their circumstances or where they live. I share the views of many in this debate that schools must have the resources they need to make that happen.

[Nick Gibb]

That is why we are investing in our schools, delivering on our promise to make funding fairer so that the investment is going to the right places, and helping schools to make the most out of every pound they receive.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does the Minister agree with my analysis, based on one-to-one meetings with headteachers in Solihull, that much of the long-term financial challenge relates to teachers' pensions and that we must put those on a sustainable long-term footing, as well as dealing with the real challenges we face in the here and now?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the teachers' pension scheme. The employer contribution rate will increase from 16% to 23% in September 2019 but, as confirmed earlier in April, we will be providing funding for this increase in 2019-20 for all state-funded schools, further education and sixth-form colleges, and adult community learning providers. My hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) asked about that funding in future years, and it will of course be a matter for the spending review.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) asked whether I could meet his local headteachers to discuss funding, and I would be delighted to do so. The Secretary of State and I meet headteachers regularly, almost on a weekly basis, to discuss not only school funding, but other issues such as standards in our schools, and we would be happy to do that with the hon. Gentleman's local headteachers as well.

Standards are rising in our schools. Thanks in part to our reforms, the proportion of pupils in good or outstanding schools has increased from 66% in 2010 to 85%. I listened carefully to the excellent opening speech by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans, who has raised the issue of school funding, both for her constituency's schools and nationally, on many occasions, including in Westminster Hall debates recently and again today. I am sure that the Treasury will also have heard what she had to say today. I can give her the assurances she seeks that the Secretary of State and I are both working hard to prepare our spending review bid for when that process starts later in the year to ensure that we have the best bid possible for schools, high-needs and post-16 funding.

As I was saying, standards are rising in our schools. In primary schools, our more rigorous curriculum is on a par with the highest-performing in the world and it has been taught since September 2014. Since it was first tested in 2016, we have seen the proportion of primary school pupils reaching the expected standard in the maths test rise from 70% to 76% in 2018, and in the reading test the figure has risen from 66% to 75%. Of course we would not know that if we adopted the Labour party's policy of scrapping SATs, which of course we will not do.

Mike Kane: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not give way.

Since the introduction of the phonics check in 2012, the proportion of six-year-olds reaching the expected standards in the phonics decoding check has risen from

58% in 2012 to 82% last year. We have risen from joint 10th to joint eighth in the PIRLS—the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study—of the reading ability of nine-year-olds, achieving our highest ever score in that survey. In secondary schools, our more rigorous academic curriculum and qualifications support social mobility by giving disadvantaged children the knowledge they need to have the same career and life opportunities as their peers. The attainment gap between the most disadvantaged pupils and their peers, measured by the disadvantage gap index, has narrowed by nearly 10% since 2011.

To support these improvements, the Government have prioritised school spending, while having to take difficult decisions in other areas of public spending. We have been able to do that because of our balanced approach to the public finances and to our stewardship of the economy, reducing the annual deficit from an unsustainable 10% of GDP in 2010—some £150 billion a year—to 2% in 2018. The economic stability that that provided has resulted in employment rising to record levels and unemployment being at its lowest level since the 1970s, giving young people leaving school more opportunities to have jobs and start their careers. Youth unemployment is at half the rate it was when we came into office in 2010, taking over from Labour.

It is our balanced approach that allows us to invest in public services. Core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. That includes the extra £1.3 billion for schools and high needs that was announced in 2017 and that we have invested across 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above the plans set out in the spending review.

Figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies show that in 2020 real-terms per pupil funding for five to 16-year-olds in schools will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000. We do recognise, though, the budgeting challenges that schools face as we ask them to achieve more for children. One element of it is about making sure that money is directed to where it is needed most. Since April last year, we have started to distribute funding through the new national funding formula, with each area's allocation taking into account the individual needs and characteristics of its pupils and schools. Schools are already benefiting from the gains delivered by the national funding formula.

Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that the previous system had left most underfunded. By 2019-20, all schools will attract an increase of at least 1% per pupil compared with 2017-18 baselines, and the most underfunded schools will attract up to 6% more per pupil by 2019-20, compared with 2017-18.

Robert Halfon: I welcome what my right hon. Friend said about phonics and SATs, which it is important we keep, but does he agree that if the national health service can have a 10-year plan and a five-year funding settlement, education should have a 10-year plan and a minimum of a five-year funding settlement?

Nick Gibb: As I have said to the Education Committee, which my right hon. Friend chairs, I do not disagree with that view. We will say more about our approach to the spending review in due course.

In Hertfordshire, where the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans is located, funding for schools has increased this year under the national funding formula by 2.4% per pupil compared with 2017. That is equivalent to an extra £32.1 million in total, when rising pupil numbers are taken into account.

My hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden made a measured and therefore persuasive speech about the funding of schools in her constituency. As a consequence, her words will undoubtedly carry weight with the Treasury. She made the important point that 90% of pupils in her constituency now attend good or outstanding schools, compared with just 67% in 2010.

I listened carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton); as a neighbouring MP, I find I always do. He will be aware that funding in his constituency has risen by 5.5% per pupil compared with 2017. That is one of the highest increases and reflects the historical underfunding of West Sussex schools—something the national funding formula was introduced to address. He referred to teachers' pay, which is due to rise by 3.5% for teachers on the main pay scale and by 2% for those on the upper pay scale.¹ We are funding both those pay rises, except for the first 1%, which schools will have budgeted for already.

I also listened carefully to the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). I congratulate him on the fact that 96% of pupils in schools in his constituency are attending good or outstanding schools. He will be aware that under the national funding formula per pupil funding in his constituency is rising by 4.5% compared with 2017-18.

I welcome the contribution to the debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) and his acknowledgement that, as a result of the fairer national funding formula, schools in his constituency will attract a 5.9% per pupil increase. In a compelling speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) raised the issue of special needs funding. Our commitment to helping every child to reach their full potential applies just as strongly to children with special educational needs and disabilities as it does to any other child, and we know that schools share that commitment. We recognise the concerns that have been raised about the costs of making provision for children and young people with complex special educational needs. We have increased overall funding allocations to local authorities for high needs year on year, and we announced in December that we will provide an additional £250 million over these last two financial years.

Jim McMahon: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not, because I am running out of time; I do apologise to the hon. Gentleman.

In Hertfordshire, for example, that means that the authority will receive an additional £5.7 million between these two financial years, taking its high-needs funding to £114.7 million. High-needs funding nationally is now over £6 billion, having risen by £1 billion since 2013. We will ensure in the coming spending review that we keep a firm focus on identifying the resources required to ensure that the most vulnerable children are receiving the support they need. Of course, the response to pressures

on high-needs budgets cannot be about just funding. It must also be about ensuring that we are spending the money effectively.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans also raised the issue of post-16 funding. We recognise the pressures that post-16 funding has been under—my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is also listening to this debate. We have protected the base rate of funding for all 16 to 19-year-old students until 2020, and our commitment to the 16-to-19 sector has contributed to what is the highest proportion of 16 to 17-year-olds participating in education or apprenticeships since records began. We are also providing additional funding to support colleges and schools to grow participation in level 3 maths. Institutions will receive an extra £600 for every additional student for the next academic year, 2019-20.

I have listened carefully to hon. and right hon. Members' speeches today. The Government recognise the pressure on schools as we seek to balance the public finances. While bringing down the budget deficit, we have protected funding for the NHS, international development and schools for five to 16-year-olds. We are now preparing the best spending review bid that we can for schools, for high needs and for post-16 funding, and today's debate will undoubtedly have an influence on the Treasury. Standards are rising in our schools. The attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds has closed by 13.5% since 2011 for primary schools and 9.5% for secondary schools. Reading standards are rising, maths standards are rising and the proportion of pupils being taught in good or outstanding schools has risen significantly. I am grateful to all Members who have contributed to today's debate and I know that they will have been heard in all the right places.

3.57 pm

Mrs Main: I thank the Minister for his response; I have to say, I think he was a little more mindful of the comments made in the Chamber today than he might have appeared to be in Westminster Hall.

It might have sounded as though Members across the House had met in a pub beforehand and conspired to sing the same song from the same hymn sheet but it is indeed the same song. We have all expressed views that reflect the constituencies that we serve. Unless these issues are addressed, whoever is sitting in the Minister's place in 10 years' time will hear the same song, and it is not just about educational outcomes. I was a teacher a long time ago, and it is about the child's experience—the experiences that we all carry through life.

We are passionate about this issue in this House, because we all know the impact of not getting education right and we all know that we are sowing the future of our nation with what we are asking today. If the Chancellor is listening, will he double whatever figure he might come up with? Or maybe even treble it; I do not mind. But whatever figure it is, it will never be enough, because excellence always cost money, effort and time, and we cannot get those on the cheap. So whatever is coming up, please listen to debates such as these, because we are not going away. Somebody else will put in for another debate, I will be there alongside them and we will come back and say, "What more can we do?", so hopefully we can get this solved.

1.[Official Report, 1 May 2019, Vol. 659, c. 3MC.]

[Mrs Main]

Resolved,

That this House notes with concern the increasing financial pressures faced by schools; further notes that schools are having to provide more and more services, including those previously provided by other public agencies including health and local authorities; notes with concern funds for schools being spread more thinly and not being sufficient to cope with additional costs; and calls on the Government to increase funding provided to schools to cover the additional services schools now perform for pupils.

Children and Young People: Restrictive Intervention

3.59 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Department for Education to urgently issue guidance on reducing the use of restrictive intervention of children and young people; and further calls on Ofsted to change its guidance to inspectors to recognise the importance of seeking to avoid the use of those interventions with children and young people.

I will start by thanking the hon. Members for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) for joining me in applying for this debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) for taking through the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act 2018 to significant advance. He deserves enormous credit. I also pay tribute to Olaseni Lewis, who tragically lost his life through the use of restraint, and to his parents, who fought so hard for justice. Finally, let me pay tribute to the brilliant Challenging Behaviour Foundation and Viv Cooper, who runs it, and to Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland and its founder Beth Morrison for the brilliant work of that organisation.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Would the right hon. Gentleman accept an intervention?

Norman Lamb: I am not going to take interventions, because I am under strict instructions to keep to time. I hope that Members will accept that, with my apologies.

This is a debate about the human rights of children. I am afraid to say that abuse of children is endemic throughout the system, and I am also afraid to say that the Government are complicit in the abuse of children for failing to get to grips with it and for not issuing guidance, which is now five years overdue. I will develop my points in due course. What are we talking about? Well, the restrictions imposed on children include: physical restraint such as prone restraint, whereby an individual—in this case, a child—is held to the floor with their face down to the floor; seclusion, whereby a child is locked in a room, and these are often children with acute and complex autism, who will be in a state of acute anxiety; mechanical restraint, whereby a child might be tied to a chair or a bed, for example; blanket restrictions, which might involve preventing children from going outside; and chemical restraint. The settings that we are talking about include residential schools, special schools and, incidentally, mainstream schools, as well as children's homes, assessment and treatment centres, and hospitals within the NHS.

By way of example, when I was Minister I visited a girl called Fauzia, who was admitted to St Andrew's Hospital in Northampton at the age of 15 and was there for nearly two years. When I visited her, her family told me that she had been subjected to the constant use of restraint, was prevented from going outside most of the time and was often secluded in a room that was, frankly, like a prison cell. I visited her two years after we had got her out of that institution, when she was being cared for by an organisation which understood that staff have to be trained in how autism affects an individual. In the period from the day that she was discharged from St Andrew's to the day that I visited

her two years later, she had not been restrained on a single occasion; we have to read something quite profound into that.

I also met Leo, the mother of Stephen, who has autism and a learning disability. Leo told me the harrowing story of a child subject to prone restraint in a special school. Stephen was referred to a residential school in Norfolk, but prone restraint was again used. Serious medical conditions were ignored and not properly addressed, which ended up with Stephen being rushed to hospital because a bump on his head actually turned out to be a brain haemorrhage that had been ignored for several weeks.

I have also been contacted by Deidre Shakespeare, whose son Harry has been subject to mechanical restraint—being tied to a chair, with his legs also tied to the chair. Deidre and her son live in Tyrone in Northern Ireland, and her concern is that, given the collapse of power sharing, there is simply no authority in Northern Ireland to address these very serious concerns, which in my view amount to human rights abuses.

On the scale of the problem, as I said at the start, it is endemic in the system. The Challenging Behaviour Foundation carried out a survey with 204 respondents: 88% of families said their disabled child had experienced physical restraint; 35% reported it happening regularly; 71% said their child had experienced seclusion; in over half the cases of physical intervention or seclusion reported, the child was between the age of five and 10—these are small children being treated in an entirely inappropriate way; 58% said their child had experienced restraint that had led to an injury; and 91% reported an emotional impact on their child. Radio 5 Live, which I applaud for featuring this issue, made a freedom of information request in 2017—only a fifth of authorities responded—and identified 13,000 physical restraints in the previous three years and 731 injuries. We are talking about children placed in these organisations by the state. It is shocking and scandalous.

Here's the thing: it does not need to happen in most cases. In most cases, it is avoidable with the proper culture and training of staff. In a report commissioned by the Government, Dame Christine Lenehan, a leading expert in this field, quotes a local authority officer who said:

“There can be a vicious circle occurring within the ASD cohort”—

people with autism. It continues:

“A poor provider triggers challenging behaviour or physical meltdowns (or fails to prevent such events), often exacerbating this with their reactions e.g. restraint, punishment or confinement. Good providers in whose care this behaviour may not have occurred will now not accept the child due to their history and pattern of risk. Therefore, the child is placed in a more restrictive or secure setting which can result in a worsening situation. Eventually, the child reaches a secure NHS setting which often is wholly inappropriate for their ASD needs. In different circumstances, a good specialist day placement could have worked for this child.” That is really shocking, because so often children who end up in a secure setting never escape from it again and spend their lives in an institution. This is happening within our society behind locked doors, and it is wholly unacceptable.

Dame Christine Lenehan in her report says:

“Strategies such as positive behaviour support (PBS) can also be effective for managing challenging behaviour. PBS assesses the relationship between environmental events and behaviour, identifies what can cause the behaviour and uses proactive strategies to

prevent it. One respondent to our call for evidence noted that using a PBS-informed strategy had coincided with an almost 90% reduction in the use of physical restraints.”

If it is possible to avoid it, to use it is an abuse of that child's human rights—full stop. There can be no compromise on this. We have to end it, and that is why it is so important that the Department for Education takes notice.

I want to contrast the approach between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education. As a Minister in the Department of Health, I issued guidance in 2014 for adults designed to radically reduce the use of restraint and to end the use of prone restraint. Now we have a provision, which will be introduced into the formal NHS contract, requiring that certified providers of training meet a standard of training that avoids the use of restraint in the first place, rather than training staff how to use restraint. That is the key difference. It will be embedded in how the NHS works and will be part of the Care Quality Commission framework.

By comparison, the Department for Education seems like a wholly different culture. The child is seen as the problem, interfering with education and therefore disciplined, with no attempt to understand their needs. We have a responsibility to understand what causes the behaviour in the first place, but there is no promotion of positive behaviour support or any other preventive approach. What a bizarre situation we have, when children are less well protected from abuse than adults. That is surely unacceptable.

There is no obligation to collect and report data on the use of restraint or seclusion, and parents do not even have to be told when their child has force used against them. The guidance offered by Ofsted is weak and needs to be reformed and reinforced. There is now a plan for legal action by 600 parents whose children have suffered physically or psychologically, with crowd-funding under way. The claim will be based on age and disability discrimination, and the Human Rights Act.

I have the following questions for the Minister. When will the guidance be published? We have been waiting for five years for it. How many children have suffered abuse in the meantime? Will it take a human rights-based approach? Will it include training at a certified standard as a requirement? Will the training be funded by the Government to ensure that it happens across the country? Will the same approach apply whatever setting the child is in?

Staff need support, training and guidance, but the bottom line is that the abuse of children must stop and the Government must act. We, and especially children, have waited far too long.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that we have very little time left. I hope that we can manage without a formal time limit, if everyone speaks for approximately five minutes.

4.11 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and to work with him to try to resolve this problem—a problem that need not exist at all.

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

We hear the phrase “safeguarding children” all the time, but words mean nothing if they are not matched by commensurate actions. We all know that looking after our children well, getting to know them as they grow and finding ways to make their lives safe, happy and fulfilled, are what every parent aspires to—and, indeed, I hope, every teacher when they embark on their careers. It is not always easy: children can be stubborn, petulant and anxious, much like their parents, probably.

Children have a natural curiosity to discover, to learn, to play, and every good parent or teacher enjoys nothing more than fuelling those interests and having the wonderful satisfaction of watching the child blossom, discover new things, learn about their unique character and gifts, and start their life’s journey with pleasure and excitement. Sadly, for vulnerable children, those with physical, neurological or emotional higher needs than most, that vision of a healthy and nurturing childhood can only be a dream. The reality is that many of those most in need of nurture and care find that they get none of that. By their particular difference, they struggle with the “normal” learning environment, and as those around them fail to realise that their charges are in distress, the children use the only tools they have to demonstrate their anxieties, fears, or even terrors, and display what we call “challenging behaviour”.

I am not a fan of politically correct language, but what does “challenging behaviour” mean? It means lashing out or perhaps hiding away: it means a child has been put under too much stress and so the most basic survival instincts kicked in. The child, fearful of whatever it is that is going on around them or happening to them, tries to protect themselves with the limited tools available to them. As the mother of a now nearly 20-year-old university student, whose Asperger’s was undiagnosed until he was nearly nine years old, learning to provide a world around him so that he could thrive, rather than struggle and suffer from profound anxiety attacks because of the normal environment around him, was a learning curve. But once we found an intervention that worked, having identified the source of the distress, his anxiety and “challenging behaviour”, as it is now called, simply fell away. A bright boy, a happy child, reading for hours at a time; other children near him—not so good. People touching his food—profoundly upsetting; bright lights or unexpected loud noises—meltdown guaranteed.

My son was lucky beyond words. We had teachers who were always willing to learn how to support him, so that he could enjoy school. A beanbag hidden behind a teacher’s desk, to escape to if a lesson was too noisy. An agreement that he only ate certain foods, and an explanation to the other children as to why. Extraordinary staff who learned, with us and with him, how to provide a positive environment. In so doing, they allowed my son to thrive and succeed within mainstream school. Not every child with special needs is so lucky.

I first met the wonderful Ella, one of my younger constituents, when her mother, Elly, contacted me shortly after I was first elected, in a state of profound distress and anger at the long-term physical damage caused to her daughter by the use of physical restraint, leading to violent reactive behaviour which left her with permanent physical damage. There seemed to be no way to empower Ella’s parents to challenge the school, nor to ask for justification for the use of restraint. That family are

extraordinary. Nothing—although so many brick walls have been put in their way—has stopped them battling to drive change for their daughter and other vulnerable children.

The school did not help. The council did not really get as stuck in as it should have done to meet its duty of care to this bright young girl. Only Ella’s parents and friends really fought to effect change for their girl, and for others they know need better support and the enactment of what having a duty of care actually means.

We need the Government to help us change the existing—inadequate at best—systems, from basic national guidance for teachers and support staff to evidence-based early intervention support for families. Learning what works for your child’s health and wellbeing is not easy, and every parent is always a novice, so let us share the evidence and best practice, to help each other most effectively. In doing so, positive behaviour support training in schools will quickly change the challenges into good environments for these children, and the adults in loco parentis for them while in their care, from whence reductions in cost to the state and, most important, the reduction of—and hopefully an end to—the unnecessary, unacceptable, irreparable damage to these young people. Be it physical or emotional damage, so much can be avoided with intelligent and supportive environments.

All children are born with great potential, and I always say it is the adults around them who either help them to thrive or allow them to fail. We can do so much better to get this right early on—support parents and thereby help each child to reach their potential. To ensure that we get this right, we need a safeguarding system that is fit for purpose. Ofsted needs to be inspecting specifically for safeguarding outcomes for disabled and special needs children, and for that all schools must have a robust, mandatory recording system of all interventions with their pupils, so that parents, councils and Ofsted can see what is actually going on and hold them to account.

In my work on children’s services on the Public Accounts Committee, I continue to be dismayed that Ofsted seems to have little guidance to inspect the outcomes for our most vulnerable children. In this area of restraint usage and oversight of special needs management, through to foster and kinship care, we need to see clearer inspection rules and a much stronger accountability system, which includes the recording and reporting of restrictive interventions and actions, so that harm to our most precious children can be held to account.

4.18 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this important debate, and on the powerful case that he made. I am sure the whole House would pay tribute to him for the progress that he has led in improving conditions for people with mental ill health over many years. Personally, I thank him for the support and advice that he so generously gave me during the passage of Seni’s law last year.

The use of restraint and excessive force is one of the most pressing issues for children who have experience of secure mental health units. Restraint is humiliating and degrading for children, as it is for adults. It can undermine their recovery and can make the child’s mental health condition worse.

There have been too many tragic incidents where children and young people have been seriously injured—even killed—because of excessive restraint. Seni's law came about in response to the horrific death of my constituent, Seni Lewis. Seni, who was just 21 years old, died following severe and prolonged face-down restraint in a seclusion unit in a mental health hospital, when up to 11 police officers took it in turns to pin him face-down on the ground with his hands cuffed behind his head and his legs in shackles. That triggered a heart attack, which put him into a coma, and he was left to die all alone in a room, tied up face-down on the floor. Seni's tragic story is just one of too many deaths and scandals, including Winterbourne View, Southern Health, St Andrews and many others that Members will be familiar with.

It is shocking that children are more likely to be restrained than adults. According to the leading mental health charity Young Minds, children under the age of 20 are four times more likely than adults to be restrained face-down, three times more likely to be tranquilised and twice as likely to be put in handcuffs or leg braces. Although children are less likely than adults to be secluded, it is surely unacceptable that any child with mental ill health is ever locked up all alone in a seclusion room.

I was grateful for the huge support from across the House for Seni's law, which became an Act of Parliament last year. It introduced some important principles into law that now need to be extended to protect all people with mental ill health, including children, in every setting, not just mental health units, to which that piece of legislation applied. Those principles are intended to reduce the use of restraint, so that it is only ever used as a very last resort and face-down restraint is never used at all.

The mental health system needs to be fully transparent. There is wide regional variation in the use of restraint against children, but we do not know why, and data is not available for us to interrogate. The campaigning charity Agenda reports that in some mental health trusts, three quarters of children are restrained, while in others it is none at all. If some trusts can completely avoid the use of restraint against children, why can every trust not do so? We need a standardised national system for recording the use of restraint, so that we can compare like with like, identify best practice and ensure that it is shared, and allow us and other observers to fully interrogate and scrutinise the system to ensure that it is supporting and not harming some of the most vulnerable children in our society.

Half of all girls with mental ill health have experienced some form of abuse, either physical or sexual, that affected their mental health. The use of restraint against them—especially being pinned face down on the floor by men—reawakens the horrific abuse that made them ill in the first place, which can mean that they leave care with worse mental ill health than they arrived with. That surely cannot be acceptable.

The second important principle is accountability. All mental health settings need a policy in place for restraint reduction, with appropriate training to ensure that restraint is avoided whenever possible. They need a named senior person who is publicly accountable for how restraint is used, so that there is clarity about who is ultimately responsible for what happens in that setting.

Despite Government attempts to discourage it, the most dangerous form of restraint—face down on the floor—was used against children more than 2,500 times

in the most recent year for which data is available, yet that form of restraint is not supposed to happen at all. The current system clearly is not working. The deaths, injuries and psychological damage that excessive restraint causes to children must stop. I hope the Government will ensure that the important principles enshrined in Seni's law and the important work undertaken by Sir Simon Wessely's mental health review are used to protect every child who experiences mental ill health.

4.23 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): First, I pay tribute to the work of Inquest and Deborah Coles, who has worked in this field for many years and has a great deal of expertise. She continues to support families through very difficult processes, including inquests, which we know, as constituency MPs, can be extremely testing times for families. I also want to thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for securing the debate and for his expertise in this matter.

It is 15 years since Gareth Myatt died in a child prison. That is a terrible anniversary, when we think of how little has changed in the human rights picture. Adam Rickwood sadly hanged himself following restraint, also by people much bigger and older than he was, yet we still hear the sorts of figures mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed).

I want very briefly to put on record my thanks for what I learned as a Member of Parliament from listening to the passage of the Bill and from Seni's family. They were suffering, but how generous they were to allow their own family experience to teach us, as Members of Parliament, the meaning of what we do and how we can press the human rights of all those young people—not just those under 18, but those in their early 20s—who end up in these terrible situations.

It is clear from the Joint Committee on Human Rights report that there is insufficient oversight and accountability in many of our settings—mental health settings, child prison settings or child training centre settings. For example, there is the tragic case of Amy El-Keria, who died at the Priory some time ago. We know that much of what happened to her before she tragically died involved inadequate staffing levels, failures to share key risk and care information with staff and inadequate systems for identifying and managing ligature risk, such as placing Amy in an unsuitable room containing high-risk ligature points and missed opportunities to remove a scarf in Amy's possession. There were failures adequately to address the bullying of Amy by her peers or to follow the Priory's anti-bullying procedures, and failures to pass on key information about Amy's increased suicide risk on the day of her death. Finally, there was the delay in undertaking the final observation during which Amy was found hanging. To add to that, as I know from reading the paperwork that came out at the inquest, not one member of staff accompanied her to the hospital when, tragically, she was pronounced dead.

We must all remember these terrible incidents. Small numbers of people are in care in some form, but these individual stories do tell a tragic truth. In these individual cases of when things going wrong, there must be much quicker action by those working in child and adolescent mental health services and various other mental health systems. I would also like to see much more supervision of staff, particularly agency staff and new staff coming in on overnight shifts, when so much of this tends to happen.

[Catherine West]

In summing up, I merely want to put on record two key points. First, the Government must comply with international law and end the restraint techniques that we know, both from the passage of Seni's law and from the work that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk has emphasised today, are unlawful and contrary to the human rights of children. Secondly, the solitary confinement of children in detention should be completed phased out as a practice.

I will reiterate the very useful points that the right hon. Gentleman made in his opening speech. When will the Government publish guidance on this important area? When will the training requirements be clarified for providers who are paid by the public purse to look after children with severe mental health problems, developmental problems and other sorts of difficulties? Will the funding be adequate for those training requirements and for the providers, and will these apply to all settings in which children, sadly, are virtually imprisoned, including both children's social care and mental health settings?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We must now have a four-minute limit.

4.28 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). I was very glad to support the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) in securing this debate, and I pay tribute to him for his commitment to safeguarding the human rights of people with learning disability, autism or both.

It is important that we debate this matter in this place because it affects the most vulnerable people in our society—children and young people, and most especially children and young people who have learning disability, autism or both, and who are often less able to communicate their thoughts and feelings, or to describe and bear witness to what has happened to them. As a consequence, there is an enormous imbalance of power between children and young people, who often cannot speak for themselves, and the adults into whose care they are placed, whether in a school, healthcare or residential setting. That imbalance of power confers a clear and important responsibility on the staff who work with those young people, but also on the Government to ensure a system that is transparent, accountable and properly resourced and equipped to provide the best possible care, education and support.

We are debating serious concerns about the use of restraint and seclusion, and there are gaps in the regulatory and training framework in some settings, particularly education. Before I set those out, I wish to pay tribute to the many dedicated, highly skilled and tireless staff who work in schools, healthcare and residential settings with children and young people who have learning disabilities, autism or both. I pay particular tribute to the fantastic Turney School in my constituency, and to Marilyn Ross and her exceptional team at the Michael Tippett School. Her visionary work in establishing the Michael Tippett College has enabled 19 to 25-year-old students with learning disabilities, autism or both to remain in education.

Recent research by the Challenging Behaviour Foundation and Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland found that nearly 90% of parents of children with SEN or behavioural needs, including autism, reported that their child had been physically restrained. Some 35% said that that happened regularly, and more than half those cases involved children aged between five and 10. Only one in eight parents said that restraint was discussed with families in advance, and just 17% said there were discussions after the event to help prevent it from happening again. Some 50% of parents reported the use of medication to manage challenging behaviour; 58% of children or young people were injured; and 91% reported emotional impacts, including PTSD, heightened anxiety and insomnia.

We know that such restraint is not necessary, and with a little education and training in those settings, proven alternative forms of behaviour management can almost eliminate the need for restraint. Guidance and regulation on the use of restraint in healthcare settings is much more stringent than it is for education settings. Ofsted makes clear that it is good practice to record incidents of restraint and inform parents, but there is no requirement on schools to do so. That is problematic, because it is precisely those schools that already model good practice and have the best leadership and governance that will abide by that advice, while those schools with problems will be less likely to do so.

In 2014, the Government promised new guidance on reducing restrictive intervention in schools, but more than five years later that guidance is still to be introduced. That is not acceptable. No parent or carer should have to worry that their loved one will suffer violence, injury or psychological distress as a result of restraint in an education, health or care setting, yet that is the reality for too many families. The gaps in the current legislative and policy framework are glaring, but they are straightforward to fill, and the delay by the Government who promised new guidance in 2014 is simply inexcusable. New legislation and guidance must be supported by appropriate training and resources. I call on the Government to introduce that new guidance and regulation as soon as possible and to ensure that all staff working with the most vulnerable children in our society are properly equipped and resourced to implement it.

4.32 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this debate. We have heard some truly excellent speeches from right hon. and hon. Members.

Like other Members, since I was first elected, I have been inundated with schooling issues. Those include parents trying to secure special educational needs assessments, or those whose children have been diagnosed with special educational needs but are not getting the help they need. There are schools that cannot afford to provide the help that is needed, and teachers who struggle to cope with the number of children who need more from them. I must have dealt with thousands of such cases over the years. The reason why is that education for children matters. It matters that children get the support they need to achieve a rounded education and that schools receive the funding they need to provide it. It matters that parents know that their children will get the best chance at life in the future, and that is critical to this debate.

With that in mind, it is little wonder that there are times when restrictive intervention is needed—an overworked teacher might be attempting to deal with a child who is misunderstood, frustrated and unable to bond with the teacher or classroom assistant as there are too many in the class. That frustration turns to violence, and the child is in danger of hurting themselves or someone nearby. In such cases, action is needed. However, there are limits on restraint, which must always be the last available option and fully considered.

Everyone who has spoken so far has referred to the need for training and resources and to the capability of the schooling system to respond to this issue. Teachers must have the knowledge and training on how and when other methods can be employed and, if there is no option, how to restrain safely. It is my belief that, due to a lack of guidance, there is a lot of confusion about the best and appropriate use. I join with colleagues in asking for that guidance to be released, as the guidance for restrictive intervention for adults has also been released.

Before the debate, I mentioned to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk that I was at a school before Christmas where a young fellow was “difficult”, shall we say? It took two teachers to supervise and restrain him, and a degree of violence did take place. I mention that to illustrate the need for schools to have the necessary teachers, training and resources. They did have that in that school and that was good to have.

I read a briefing supplied to me by one concerned body called the Challenging Behaviour Foundation, whose research has thrown up a few surprising statistics that are certainly worth quoting today. The main source of data is a “5 Live Investigates” freedom of information request to local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales that revealed 13,000 physical restraints over the previous three years, resulting in 731 injuries. Only a fifth of authorities replied, so the information presented might not be the whole picture. Another source of data was a survey conducted by the Challenging Behaviour Foundation. Some 88% of the 204 respondents said their disabled child had experienced physical restraint, with 35% reporting that it happened regularly. Some 71% of families who completed the survey said their child had experienced seclusion, with 21% reporting that it was taking place on a daily basis.

Those figures are challenging and they tell us the real story. I believe there is a better way to prevent these kinds of issues. Issuing guidance is certainly one step, but it is not the whole answer. Classrooms must have sufficiently trained staff members to deal with these scenarios without disrupting the other 29 children in a class. Children who need additional help need assessments, and those assessments must result in extra help and support. Parents must understand what is happening and be able to provide a helpful insight into the best ways to understand a child. There are so many factors, but the guidance that has been on the cards since 2014 must instead be off the cards and taken into schools urgently as the first step to ensuring that the education of every child is the best that it can be.

4.36 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Children and young people are one of the most vulnerable groups in our society. Wherever they live, wherever they go to school, wherever they spend their free time, they require care

and protection. Children and young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and those in care are particularly vulnerable. Yet, as we have heard in this debate today, these are the people most likely to be subjected to restrictive interventions. Sadly, this often results in injury, trauma and other long-lasting consequences.

As we have heard, recent research has highlighted the potential damaging impacts of restrictive intervention. A Challenging Behaviour Foundation survey demonstrates the negative effects it has on children and their families. As we have heard, 88% of respondents said that their disabled child had experienced physical restraint, with 35% reporting that it happened regularly. The truly shocking bit for me, Madam Deputy Speaker, was that 58% of respondents said that the physical restraint had led to injury. In other words, it is doing more harm than good. Research has shown that there is a marked increase in the diagnosis of anxiety in children where restrictive interventions were used, and adverse life experiences during someone’s formative years drastically increase their chances of developing mental health problems.

Concerns about restraint have been raised by the UN, civil society and parents and carers of those affected. Beth Morrison was mentioned earlier. She is a constituent of mine from my city of Dundee. She has campaigned for over five years on this issue, after her son Calum was subjected to harsh restraint. Beth gave evidence at the Scottish Parliament’s Public Petitions Committee and has subsequently worked with the Scottish Government to develop their guidelines on restraint. Today, I would like to thank her personally.

The Scottish Government have taken action to strengthen their guidance on restrictive intervention. They make it clear that the use of physical intervention should only ever be used as a last resort. It should only be considered in the best interests of ensuring the safety of a child, as part of a de-escalation approach, and never for disciplinary purposes.

We all appreciate and understand the hard work and sacrifice of teachers and carers, and the duty of care they have for all those they look after. We know the pressures they are put under every day. We also have no doubt experienced an unruly child in the classroom—I am sure some of us in this room will understand that very well. We have met people who are unable to follow instructions, sometimes through no fault of their own, and we have met those whose fuse is that slight bit shorter than everyone else’s. In most cases, these situations are resolvable, but in others individuals can become a danger to themselves, to other children and to staff. Therefore, at the heart of the Scottish Government’s guidance is a clear framework on how to avoid challenging behaviour arising in the first place, how to de-escalate and avoid restraint, and how physical restraint should be used only if it is necessary and as a last resort. Staff use their knowledge and assessment of a child or young person to predict and plan for situations that can lead to challenging or distressed behaviour. They also seek to provide ongoing support for the individual, paying particular attention to any additional needs.

The guidance sets out the Scottish Government’s clear expectation that every local authority should have a policy on physical intervention, along with a process for how decisions on physical intervention should be made. All decisions to intervene physically are recorded to demonstrate that children’s rights have been taken

[Chris Law]

into account in the reaching of those decisions. The guidance refers specifically to the United Nations convention on the rights of the child. The Scottish Government have committed themselves to incorporating the convention's principles in domestic law. Their aim is to make Scotland the best place in the world for a child to grow up in, and recognising, respecting and promoting the rights of children is essential to achieving it. The core values in the UK Government's draft guidance largely mirror those in the Scottish Government's guidance, and we welcome that. However, the guidance must be published at long last: five years is far too long for anyone to wait, particularly those young children.

As we all know, human decisions have to be made at a particular time, in a particular place and in a particular set of circumstances. However, as I have said, physical restraint must be required only as a last resort, and it is vital that it is proportionate, measured and understood by all participants. As someone who spent time as a child in care, I have witnessed personally what restraining does to young people, and I therefore fully understand how important it is for it to take place only as a last resort. I also have a personal understanding of how difficult it is for those who have to use physical restraint as a last resort to make the right decision. It is imperative that children and young people know their rights, and that the actions of teachers and carers are always guided by the need to protect them.

Ultimately, clear guidance and good policy will lead to better decisions on more occasions. With the appropriate guidance and policy in place, we will hopefully see an end to the troubling stories and statistics that we have heard today and 'ensure that all young people, children and staff are kept safe.

4.41 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. It was secured by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—who made an excellent speech—along with my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who gave some powerful personal testimony, as did the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law).

This is a difficult and, for some, very personal issue to talk about. I congratulate all the Members who have spoken, including my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed). Members will know that his private Member's Bill, known as Seni's law, was predicated on the devastating and inexcusable death of his constituent Seni Lewis in 2010. Seni had been restrained so excessively, so unreasonably, that he died. Seni's law addressed the issue of prone restraint—the act of forcing someone's face into the ground—and, as we know, Seni was not the first person to die in such circumstances. In 2014, during his time as a Minister in the Department of Health, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk issued guidance on the restraining of adults, with the intention that it should be followed by guidance on the restraining of children.

The national inquiry into child sexual abuse recently concluded that "pain compliance" was child abuse and should be outlawed, and the Equalities and Human Rights Commission has also argued that such methods should not be used on children. Article 19 of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, which has already been mentioned today, states that Governments must do all they can to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and bad treatment by their parents or anyone else who looks after them. According to the BBC, these painful techniques were designed for prison riots, with the aim of forcing individuals to comply through the use of pain. I should not even need to say this, but we should not be using prison riot techniques on children.

What is also concerning, and constitutes the essence of the debate, is the continued absence of clear guidance from the Government. Although their consultation on draft guidance to reduce the need for the restraint of children took place between November 2017 and January 2018, we have still not received the results. Will the Minister tell us when they will be published?

Parents have argued that, in the absence of guidance and with the prevailing uncertainty, schools are using so-called restraint techniques against children with special educational needs and disabilities. That has occurred in an environment of austerity; one that has seen a crisis in funding for children with special educational needs. As we discussed in the previous debate, local authority children's services are currently overspending by £800 million. It was reported last November, for instance, that council overspending on children's special educational needs and disabilities has trebled in just three years.

The Minister might be aware that the Challenging Behaviour Foundation and Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland released a report in January on the use of restrictive intervention. The report found that 88% of parents surveyed said that their disabled child had experienced physical restraint, and 35% said that it happened regularly. Over half the cases of physical intervention or seclusion were of children between the ages of five and 10, with one case involving a two-year-old child. It should come as no surprise that this has had a negative effect on the children's health. Over 90% of those surveyed said that restraint had emotionally impacted their child. That physical intervention was for cases of incontinence, meltdowns and shutdowns—situations that leave children unable to communicate as they are so overloaded with emotions.

I will return quickly to the Government's own delayed guidance. When Ministers launched the consultation, they stated that any guidelines would not apply to mainstream schools. This is clearly illogical. Guidance must apply across the board, not just in specific settings. Otherwise, this suggests that mainstream schools are not safe spaces for children with special educational needs and disabilities. Will the forthcoming guidance be universal, so that all children are protected?

I would now like to move on to the treatment of young people who are autistic or have learning disabilities or mental health conditions. Across mental health, autism and learning disability services, over 1,000 young people were subject to a restrictive intervention in 2017-18. That accounted for 26,000 separate restrictive interventions. What is shocking is that the under-20s in these services who are subject to any restrictive intervention are, on

average, subject to more than twice as many as those in any other age group. There are also hundreds of young people who are subjected to seclusion, segregation and—perhaps most worryingly—chemical restraint. We are drugging these young people because their behaviour is deemed to be too challenging. That is not acceptable. I know that the Care Quality Commission is currently carrying out a review of the use of restraint in these services, but it will not report until next year.

Currently 250 young people who are autistic or have learning disabilities are being detained in inappropriate care settings that were covered by the Transforming Care programme. That programme was intended to move people out of inappropriate settings and back into the community. Since 2015, however, the number of young people in such institutions has more than doubled. Some of these children have been sent more than 100 km from home. Ministers have recognised that this is wrong, but they have not yet done anything to stop it. Moreover, the programme expired last Sunday. Can the Minister therefore tell us what plans there are either to continue the work or to introduce a new programme to close inappropriate care settings? What funding will be made available in the next five years, given that the Government have committed to funding only an additional year of the programme?

What happens in early childhood has a defining impact on human development, affecting everything from educational achievement to economic security and health. Violence towards children can leave a long, irrevocable shadow over their lives. There can be no place for it anywhere. I therefore hope that the Minister will take the contributions made to heart.

4.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I thank all colleagues who have contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who offered a very personal story, and the hon. Members for Croydon North (Mr Reed), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Dundee West (Chris Law). I commend the Challenging Behaviour Foundation, which has been mentioned several times, and Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland for all the work they do, and Dame Christine Lenehan for the work she has done for my Department. I also congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this important debate.

As has already been noted during the debate, any use of restrictive intervention is, quite rightly, always a sensitive issue. Restrictive intervention can have long-term consequences for the health and wellbeing of children and young people, and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk really brought that to life with the story of Fauzia, Stephen and Harry. It can also have a negative impact on the staff who carry out such interventions. It is never something to turn to unless there are very good reasons to do so. As colleagues have so eloquently said, the preferred approach should always be to use positive behaviour support and other alternatives that can de-escalate challenging behaviour and tackle the reasons for it at source.

I want to start by highlighting the guidance that is already in place for teachers around the use of reasonable force. The law and our guidance are clear that there are

situations where using reasonable force is necessary in a school environment, to make schools safe places for pupils and staff. For example, force can be used to prevent pupils from hurting themselves or others, from damaging property or from causing disorder. However, the law is absolutely clear that force can never be used as a punishment. Any policy on the use of reasonable force should also acknowledge any duties in relation to disabled children and children with special educational needs.

There are times when the only realistic response to a situation is restraint or restrictive intervention—for example, when a young child is about to run into a busy road, or when a pupil is hurting a teacher or child and refuses to stop when asked. The same would be true in a hospital if a child were hurting staff or other patients. Our starting point on any use of restrictive intervention is that every child and young person has a right to be treated with respect and dignity, to have their needs recognised and to be given the right support.

We also fully appreciate that some children and young people with conditions such as learning disabilities, autistic spectrum conditions or mental health difficulties may react to distressing or confusing situations by displaying behaviours that may be harmful to themselves and others. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed eloquently described the situation of her own son. Restrictive intervention may be needed to minimise the impact of their behaviour on themselves or on other people, but it should only be what is reasonable to deal with the situation, and proportionate to the circumstances.

Restrictive intervention should be avoided wherever possible. Instead, proactive, preventive, non-restrictive approaches should be used in respect of the challenging behaviour to tackle the issues early. Examples include providing an environment that does not overwhelm the child with noise or other stimulation, putting the right special educational provision in place to enable the child to learn effectively, and developing an appropriate behaviour management plan.

As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk knows from his time in government, guidance is in place to support health settings in helping to care for someone who displays behaviour that might be considered challenging. I would like to commend him for his contribution in this area. The Department of Health's positive and proactive care guidance, published in 2014, sets out how restrictive interventions should be used appropriately in health settings where there is a real possibility of harm to the person, to staff, to the public or to others.

I know that there has been deep concern in response to media reports in recent months about the use of restrictive interventions in mental health hospitals. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has asked the Care Quality Commission to review and make recommendations about the use of restrictive interventions in settings that provide in-patient and residential care for those who have, or might have, mental health problems, learning disabilities or autism. We will be following the progress of this review closely.

Through our new compulsory health education, all children will be taught how to look after their mental wellbeing and to recognise when classmates are struggling. In addition, we recently updated our mental health and behaviour advice, which provides signposting and

[Nadhim Zahawi]

information on how schools can identify pupils whose behaviour may result from underlying mental health difficulties, adapt the approaches outlined in their relevant policies and, of course, adjust policies as appropriate to support pupils.

Positive and proactive care has been important in setting expectations about the use of restrictive interventions in health settings, but there were concerns that the policy did not say enough about children and young people and about settings beyond health. That is why the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care have consulted on new guidance to help with the prevention and management of challenging behaviour of those with autism, mental health difficulties or learning disabilities. We worked closely with a range of special educational needs and disability organisations in drawing up the draft guidance for consultation. We are working through some of the complex issues raised in the consultation responses and will, as many colleagues have requested today, announce our next steps shortly. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk and other Members, including the shadow Minister, asked about the delay, but the guidance addresses some sensitive issues, so it is only right that we have taken the time to engage with the education and health settings where it will apply.

We were clear in our consultation paper that restrictive intervention should be used only when absolutely necessary, in accordance with the law and clear ethical values and principles that respect the rights and dignity of children and young people, and in proportion to the risks involved. Restrictive intervention can never be a long-term solution, and we are particularly concerned about long-term or institutionalised uses of restrictive interventions, which several colleagues have described so harrowingly. We are aiming to support settings and services to develop their practice so that they have confidence to provide better support for children and young people with challenging behaviours and provide safe environments in which they can thrive.

While the guidance was written for special schools and specialist colleges, and focuses on students who have learning disabilities, mental health difficulties or autism, other settings may wish to use the guidance if they would find it helpful. The guidance is consistent with Ofsted's expectations of schools and care settings in relation to the use of restraint and restrictive intervention. Last year, Ofsted published guidance to inspectors entitled "Positive environments where children can flourish: a guide for inspectors about physical intervention and restriction of liberty", the thrust of which relates to the importance of proactive approaches to behaviour management and minimising the use of restrictive intervention. The fact that Ofsted developed the guidance is evidence of how importantly they take the issue.

I am enormously grateful to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk for raising such important issues today, and I hope that he is somewhat reassured that the Government recognise them. In making our final decisions on the guidance, we will consider the points made in the debate today, and I am grateful for the contributions of many colleagues. We have a real opportunity here to make a difference to the lives of some of our most vulnerable children and young people and of those who work with them, and it is crucial that we get it right.

4.58 pm

Norman Lamb: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate, which included some powerful contributions. The personal testimony from the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) was telling, because the wonderful news is that her son is now at university. The Minister should note that, because not only will early intervention and positive behaviour support being embedded in the entire system give people the chance of a good life, but the state will save a fortune. That is why it is so important.

We need the guidance. It needs to have teeth and to be backed by proper accredited training and by mandatory recording and reporting across the system. The Government need to get on with that now, because we must end the scandal of children not being protected from abuse in the way that adults and those in health settings already are. It is unacceptable that children in residential schools and in other settings are not protected. As the shadow Minister said, the guidance must be comprehensive. There is no justification for leaving out some settings, such as mainstream schools. The guidance should apply to everyone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Department for Education to urgently issue guidance on reducing the use of restrictive intervention of children and young people; and further calls on Ofsted to change its guidance to inspectors to recognise the importance of seeking to avoid the use of those interventions with children and young people.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance because Buckinghamshire County Council passed a unanimous motion this afternoon asking for High Speed 2 to be paused until the notice to proceed, which has already been delayed to the back end of this year, has been approved. This is a significant request because such notice cannot be given until the management capability, the affordability of the contract and the robustness of the already-discredited business case have been proved.

My county and my constituency are suffering daily disruption and catastrophic environmental damage, and we have not even seen the detailed design of this project. There are continuing complaints about poor communication by HS2, and the urgency of this matter is that there is news that machinery has already arrived in the county to start destroying a very large number of mature oak trees.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to know whether you have had any notice from the Secretary of State for Transport that he will make an urgent statement justifying this environmental vandalism, and whether there are any opportunities, when there are such serious doubts, for this project to be halted. What powers do we have in this House to bring about that halting or pausing of the project?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order. As she knows, the point she raises is not a matter I can address from the Chair, except in so far as to say that I have not had any indication that the Secretary of State for Transport, or any other Minister, wishes to come to the Chamber today to address the issue.

The right hon. Lady is very well aware that there are certain mechanisms she can utilise to attempt to bring the Secretary of State, or one of his Ministers, to the Dispatch Box at the earliest possible moment to answer the questions she has put. Of course, the whole House notes, once again, her extreme diligence and perseverance in dealing with this very important matter on behalf of her constituents.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you very much for your guidance from the Chair. Would it be possible for the message to go out from this House today, and from the Chair itself, that there is a request for the Secretary of State for Transport to come to this House at the earliest opportunity, which I believe will be Monday, to explain why this environmental vandalism is continuing in our county before any notice to proceed on HS2 has been given?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, I thank the right hon. Lady for her further point of order. She has raised the matter in a most eloquent fashion and, as she knows very well, matters raised on the Floor of the House will, I trust, be notified by the Treasury Bench to the appropriate Department and the appropriate Minister.

As to the powers that are available to Ministers in the respect that the right hon. Lady asks, I cannot give her a direct answer but, of course, I will say that I would not be at all surprised to find that on Monday, the next time the House sits, she and perhaps some of her local colleagues have submitted an urgent question for the consideration of Mr Speaker.

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (MAY DAY)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 2 May 2019, do adjourn until Tuesday 7 May 2019.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 9(6)),

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 10(2)(b), the sittings in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 7 May shall begin at 11.30am, shall be suspended from 1.30pm to 4.30pm and may then continue for up to a further three hours.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

Travellers in Mole Valley

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

5.5 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I thank the Minister for being here as the last man standing. It is an awful position, one I used to have, too. However, this is an opportunity to raise a vexing issue that has plagued my constituency and Surrey as a whole. We are now in what we call the summer Traveller season; it is like a disease. Mole Valley constituency consists of Mole Valley District Council south of the M25 and the eastern wards of Guildford Borough Council. It is close to London and to Epsom downs, so it is attractive to Travellers from afar, and many of those come with a distinct Irish accent.

We have two distinct, different types of Traveller problem. The first involves those who suddenly appear and squat on a site. The second involves those who squat on a site that they say they own or have access to, and then proceed to openly defy planning regulations. The first group very occasionally have permission to camp—as I have noticed—use the site and then they leave it as it was found. That is rare, and normally things are quite different. This is exemplified by an incident at the end of March, when five caravans and various vehicles squatted on a public commuter car park near Leatherhead station. The council moved fast—or, rather, as fast as possible—and after a few days it served a section 77 notice for the caravans to move. Predictably, that was ignored and a couple of days later the police arrived in force and moved them on, with the council then doing the clean-up. This was a waste of time and money, and a blockage, with a loss of space, of a busy commuter car park.

Last Traveller season, Surrey had hundreds of these incidents, and Mole Valley had more than its share. Surrey's councils and the population accept the need for Traveller sites, but not without limit. Currently, the Surrey districts are working together to provide one or two transit sites, which will help the police and councils to justify their action. Elmbridge Borough Council, a Surrey council, has tried something revolutionary. It mapped every public space—churchyards, schools, playgrounds and so on—in Elmbridge and then obtained a three-year injunction against Traveller squatting on those mapped sites. That meant the police in Elmbridge could act straightaway, regardless of who the individuals were, and whom the vehicles and caravans belonged to. However, this approach has several downsides. As a member of the National Farmers Union, I note that no private land, including farm land, was covered by the injunction. The injunction was for only three years, and huge public efforts and expenditure went into setting up the maps. What this approach does provide is an indication that if such land squatting was criminalised nationally, as I believe applies in Ireland, direct action by the police could take place, whoever owns the land, although obviously at the landowner's request.

The second area of Traveller abuse relates to abuse of planning law. Mole Valley District Council and the Mole Valley constituency are smothered with building restrictions; we have sites of special scientific interest, areas of outstanding natural beauty, green belt and so on.

[*Sir Paul Beresford*]

This includes the Guildford wards next door. Any constituent from the settled community that builds without permission, particularly on land where these restrictions apply, can expect to be required to remove the development. Some of the Traveller community do not believe these laws apply to them—or they choose to ignore them. I wish to focus on how a very few of these Travellers manipulate the system in ways that would not be entertained by settled residents or by planning authorities. In saying that, I emphasise that there are a number of successful, popular Gypsy, Traveller sites in the constituency where there are no difficulties and no arguments, and where the community is integrated.

First, I shall touch on two long-standing examples. One is in Guildford, on a site on a narrow little private lane off the A246. The A246 is a busy road, but the lane is tiny and narrow, with few properties. Development is severely limited as it is an area of natural beauty, with ancient forests—it is green belt and so on. A Traveller from outside Mole Valley inherited the land, or access to it, squatted on it and, over a short period, placed a number of caravans, trucks and cars there and ran several different businesses from the site.

The second example is in Leatherhead, on green-belt pasture land. Since what I believe are Irish Travellers arrived at the site in 2003, which is a few days back, the area has been fenced, a fast-growing hedge has been planted, a number of caravans have been placed there and a few other buildings of a more permanent design have been built. To my amusement, two large, high, wrought-iron, electrically operated gates have been erected between pillars at the entrances. It looks like the entry to a minor stately home.

On both sites, it is apparently the norm that all injunctions have been ignored; numerous applications have been made, rejected and appealed; and relations with the local community are fractious, with numerous threats to community members. As I said, the Travellers arrived in 2003, so this has been going on for years, without success in ensuring that the planning laws respected by the settled community are not ignored or dodged by devious legal means by the people who have squatted there.

A third case commenced this Easter weekend in Capel. By chance, I drove past and came across the site. Going by the accent, it was probably a group of Irish Travellers, with two or three small caravans squatted on a two-acre field. They claim that they own the land, which may or may not be true. The land is accessed by a narrow agreed-access way over another person's land. The squatters bought in a small digger and widened the access way, and they wooden-fenced the widened way without the landowner's agreement. This morning, I observed that the fence has been taken down while the access is being further enlarged and re-fenced to allow through bigger vehicles, such as horse-carrying vehicles and bigger caravans. The standing passage right of way for this field specifically bans caravans.

The individuals have brought in a number of lorry-loads of hardcore, which was laid and spread by a fairly large JCB digger. The wooden buildings were knocked down to make space for what I understand are going to be new buildings, including stables. A local neighbour I talked to was threatened by the individuals in respect of the water supply, which I understand has been accessed

probably without the water company's agreement. Moreover, other neighbours have been threatened and told not to interfere or they will suffer severe retaliation.

The local council is seeking legal advice pending an approach to the courts. The Travellers have put in the usual foot-in-the-door planning application for caravans and stables for a horse business. This probably means that the council cannot act on any injunction until the application is heard, presumably reviewed, refused and then appealed. That will probably be followed by a further sequence of applications and appeals, and in around 20 years' time these people will have continued to breed there, raised their horses, increased the whole site, or at least the number of vehicles on it, and added numerous caravans and more businesses.

The behaviour is along the lines of what I have seen of the Mafia in Sicily. One might ask why these people would act in this way; the answer is, of course, because they can and nobody, including the courts, the police and the local authority, seems capable of stopping them. The Minister and his Department have been running a review for months, now running into years. It is time for a speedy and tough response.

First, in cases of squatting on possibly-owned land and the ignoring of planning regulations, I would like the Government to change the legislation to enable local authority planning officers to place an immediate stop notice on even minor development, with heavy fines and ultimately jail for failure to comply and return the land to the condition it was in before. Leave it to the Travellers rather than the local authorities to go to court if they wish to oppose the stop notice. Where Travellers squat on other people's land without permission, this should be made a criminal offence. That is how it is done in Ireland and it seems to work, enabling the police to take direct and immediate action.

Next, will the Minister consider tightening up the legal definition of Travellers? It is too loose at the moment, and one thing that those who squat do not do is travel. Related to that is the extraordinary requirement that the claim to need to live in caravans should overcome the normal and understandable offer of bricks and mortar accommodation. That is particularly relevant where children and infants would by normal standards be accommodated in a better and healthier environment in a normal dwelling. I have a number of other suggestions, but I will test just one more. Will the Minister enlarge on the definition of repetitive similar applications, so that these can be accumulated and rejected at a stroke?

There is a belief among many of the settled community who brush up against these individuals—that is a polite way of putting such contact—that such Travellers ignore normal law-abiding activity because the law is weak and ineffective. My experience supports that feeling. Change is years overdue; and, because of the Easter events, let me make a vain request: can any change be made retrospective to the day before last Easter? Over to you, Minister.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this important debate. Reading through the materials to prepare for this evening, I saw very clearly his long-standing

commitment to standing up for his constituents on, as he described it, this vexing issue. It was also clear that he has consistently pushed the Government to support his residents, and I commend him for that.

I am pleased to say that the Government take the issue of unauthorised encampments extremely seriously. Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing have listened extensively to the views of those in this House on this highly sensitive and important issue and recognise the strong feelings and concerns raised by many Members. Just as my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley has articulated powerfully about his own constituents, many other hon. Members have also highlighted the sense of unease and intimidation that residents feel when an unauthorised encampment occurs, the frustration at being unable to access amenities and premises and the waste left and cost once an unauthorised encampment has moved on. The Government were also troubled to hear about the widespread perception that the rule of law does not apply to those who choose a nomadic lifestyle and that the sense of available enforcement powers did not protect settled communities properly—all points that my hon. Friend has made on many occasions previously.

The Government therefore sought evidence on this issue through a formal and substantive consultation. Our “Powers for dealing with unauthorised development and encampments” consultation received more than 2,000 responses, and I am pleased to say that the Government published our response just a couple of months ago. Among the various concerns raised by colleagues in the House and members of the public, particular issues were highlighted regarding illegal activity, enforcement or the lack thereof, concerns about planning policy and the green belt, and concerns about outcomes for the travelling community.

I am confident that I speak for everyone in this House when I say that we recognise that the majority of the travelling community are decent, law-abiding people, but we need to ensure that the system is fair for all members of our communities. That means ensuring that everybody has the same opportunities, is subject to the same laws and is free from the negative effects of those who choose to break the law.

I am pleased to say that the Government response puts forward a package of measures to address those issues, including consultation on stronger powers for the police to respond to unauthorised encampments, practical and financial support for local authorities to deal with unauthorised encampments, support for Traveller site provision, and support for the travelling community to improve life chances. I thank ministerial colleagues in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice for their assistance in this work.

I will summarise the various strands of work that the Government are now undertaking. In doing so, I will respond to the specific points raised by my hon. Friend. I will first address my hon. Friend’s concern regarding intentional unauthorised development—in particular, how intentional unauthorised development should be taken into account when planning permission is sought retrospectively. In 2015, the Government introduced a policy that made intentional unauthorised development a material consideration in the determination of planning applications and appeals. As set out in our response, we are concerned that harm is caused where the development

of land has been undertaken in advance of obtaining planning permission; the Government have listened to my hon. Friend on this issue. The Government have now committed to consulting on options for strengthening this policy on intentional unauthorised development so that local authorities have the tools to address the effects of such development. This will help to ensure greater confidence and fairness in the planning system.

On a related matter, I reassure my hon. Friend that the Government remain committed to strong protection of the green belt, which my hon. Friend has also championed many times in this place. The Government have been very clear, through the national planning policy framework, that inappropriate development—including Traveller sites, whether temporary or permanent—is harmful to the green belt and should only be approved in very special circumstances. The document “Planning policy for traveller sites”, which was updated in 2015, makes it clear that personal circumstances and unmet need are unlikely to clearly outweigh harm to the green belt.

The planning system is of course continually reviewed, and I will take on board the comments made by my hon. Friend tonight as the Department looks at updating its guidance for Traveller sites to bring that in line with the national planning policy framework. Indeed, the Department always reserves the option of issuing planning practical guidance documents to fine tune our view on particular interpretations of planning guidance.

This Government are also committed to continuing to address the disparities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. As a result, we have provided £200,000 of funding for six projects that aim to improve outcomes in the areas of educational attainment, health and social integration. We have also funded 22 projects that support Roma communities across England through the controlling migration fund. Interventions include improving access to services, improving health outcomes, outreach and supporting children and English language learning. We have also provided two projects with £55,000 each to tackle hate crime against GRT communities.

I will finish by summarising our ongoing work on enforcement against unauthorised encampments, because I am aware that this has been a particular concern, as highlighted by my hon. Friend. I am pleased to say that we have identified a set of measures to extend the powers available to the police to enable unauthorised encampments to be tackled more effectively and hopefully to reduce the frustration felt by many constituents of my hon. Friend and others that these issues are not being dealt with as they would like.

As highlighted in our response to the recent consultation, the Government will seek parliamentary approval to amend sections 61 and 62A of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. These amendments will include increasing the period in which trespassers directed from land will be unable to return from three months to 12 months.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will that apply where the individuals concerned claim to own or actually own the land, or just on public-type land or other people’s land?

Rishi Sunak: This is a matter for the Home Office, which will soon be launching a public consultation on the specific nature of these measures. I am sure that it

[*Rishi Sunak*]

will welcome my hon. Friend's views on how they should be implemented and the detail behind them. I would be happy to ensure that his views are passed on to the Department as it constructs the consultation.

The amendments will also include lowering from six to two or more the number of vehicles needing to be involved in an unauthorised encampment before police powers can be exercised and enabling the police to remove trespassers from land that forms part of the highway, which is another very specific barrier that has been identified.

My hon. Friend said that England should consider adopting the Irish model to criminalise unauthorised encampments. Like many others, he notes that this process in the Republic of Ireland had led to an increased number of Travellers in this country, and many have urged the Government to adopt the Irish model. I would like to reassure him and all those interested in pursuing this that the Government will conduct a review of how this can be achieved.

My Department will support local authorities with up to £1.5 million of funding to support planning enforcement. Finally, my hon. Friend raised temporary stop notices. These allow local authorities to act swiftly

to tackle unauthorised developments, and I am pleased to tell him that the Secretary of State has confirmed that he is minded to extend the period for which these temporary orders can be put in place.

I am also pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the Secretary of State is looking forward to sitting down with him to discuss these issues in more detail and, in particular, to ensure we can learn from the experience of his constituents as we look to improve measures to tackle this greatly vexing issue.

I thank my hon. Friend for all his contributions to this debate. He should without question be commended for ensuring that the views and needs of his constituents are raised in this House with force and power and repeatedly with Ministers so that we can act to improve the lives of his residents through changing these policies. I hope that he feels reassured that the Government are listening to his concerns and progressing the commitments we made in response to the consultation. I look forward to working with him on these issues in the coming months.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 9 April 2019

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

Devolution of Welfare

9.30 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered devolution of welfare.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating this debate and to my colleagues who are here to participate. We are of course meant to be in our constituencies this week, but events have overtaken us, so I am pleased that we are able to use our time in Westminster to discuss an issue that affects many of the people whom we represent. Indeed, the devolution of welfare is set to impact more than 1 million people in Scotland. That is why it is so important that the process is got right.

I want to make it crystal clear that I enthusiastically support the devolution of the welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament. The Scotland Act 2016 fulfilled a promise made by the United Kingdom Government—the so-called vow—that voting to remain part of the United Kingdom, as Scots did so overwhelmingly in 2014, would not mean an end to devolution. The Conservative Government established the cross-party Smith commission to look at what should be devolved. The Conservative Government then passed the 2016 Act, which devolved a significant tranche of welfare powers, and my Scottish Conservative colleagues in Holyrood voted for the Bill that has paved the way for Scottish Ministers to take over the powers.

No one can question this Government's or the Conservative party's commitment to this process. Devolution of welfare allows the Scottish Parliament to try different approaches, to learn from and build on experiences in other parts of the United Kingdom and to deliver welfare more locally in a way that is more tailored to Scottish needs. That is a good thing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman refers to how things work in other parts of the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland Assembly is not functioning at the moment as it should be, but when it was, we had a very good relationship with the Conservative party and Government that enabled us to bring in some changes in relation to the Department for Work and Pensions that helped us in Northern Ireland. That involved taking some money out of our block grant. It meant that we were able to help the more vulnerable people. We have very large numbers of disabled people who are in receipt of benefit, whether it be disability living allowance or personal independence payments, across Northern Ireland. A relationship between the Government—our Government, the Conservative Government—and the devolved Administrations is the way forward, and the way to make things happen.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point about the importance of different Governments within the United Kingdom working together.

Ultimately, and in this policy area in particular, we are helping some of the most vulnerable people in society, and it is imperative that we get it right. That is why this debate is so important.

I think it a good thing that more control over welfare is coming to Scotland, but it is clearly a challenge, and it is obvious that the Scottish National party Government in Scotland have significantly underestimated the challenge. Under the 2016 Act, 11 DWP benefits are being devolved to Scotland. The power to legislate for that has already been transferred. On 1 April next year, the Scottish Government are due to gain “executive competence”, which is essentially administrative control over the benefits. Those are significant new powers. Launching Social Security Scotland, the First Minister described it as an “historic moment”.

Although some of the benefits to be devolved are less substantial—they are of course hugely important to those who receive them—significant benefits will be taken on by the Scottish Government. They include PIP, carer's allowance and DLA and, as a package, they account for about £3 billion, or just over 15% of total social security spending in Scotland.

The Department for Work and Pensions has been working with the Scottish Government to allow the change to take place. The Scottish Government have previously promised that they will be fully delivering these benefits by the end of the Scottish Parliament's current term, which ends in 2021. In fact, the Scottish Government previously indicated that they hoped to complete the process by 2020, so the timetable had already slipped slightly. Given that the Scotland Act was introduced in this place in May 2015, the Scottish Government could have got ahead of the game and begun preparing for this process much earlier than they did.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I compliment my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He has mentioned the investment that the DWP has already made in helping the Scottish Government to prepare to assume the devolved powers for these benefits. Does he know how much that has cost the DWP in addition to its usual expenses?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and I am going to come on to that shortly. Clearly, there is a cost implication of the Scottish Government's failure to keep to the timetable that they have anticipated.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this incredibly important debate to this place. Does he agree that, in fact, the blame lies firmly at the door of the SNP Scottish Government? I asked a question in the Chamber, and have met the Secretary of State about this matter as well. The DWP did all it possibly could to ensure the Scottish Government were ready to take on these powers. The blame lies firmly at their door, because this UK Government have done everything they possibly can.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point; I am going to expand on that a little further. Despite all the rhetoric we hear from the SNP about taking on these powers and many others, it has absolutely failed to fulfil those promises on the delivery of welfare.

[John Lamont]

By the end of February, the Scottish Government announced that they expected it to take until at least 2024 before this process would be completed. They also said they would not be taking on competence for the severe disablement allowance, instead leaving that controlled by the Department for Work and Pensions indefinitely. The issue is important for this place, because these powers were due to be devolved. It therefore now falls on the Department for Work and Pensions to step in and ensure that the people of Scotland—our constituents—receive the support they need.

All of this is perhaps understandable. Delivering a welfare system is a complex matter that we need to get right. I acknowledge that the UK Government have needed to delay the roll-out of universal credit, which is a much more complex undertaking. The SNP has spent the past decade criticising the UK Government for their welfare policies and demanding these powers, so the people of Scotland expected the Scottish Government to be keen to take them on as quickly as possible. Instead, it will take the Scottish Government nine years to build a social security system, despite one of the benefits being handed back to the Department for Work and Pensions here at Westminster. This is from a party that tried to con the voters of Scotland by saying that they could set up an entire independent country, with all the apparatus that this would have entailed, in just 18 months. This is from a party that is demanding the devolution of all welfare powers to Scotland, as well as a whole range of other powers.

There is not really any disagreement about why this has happened. I am sure the Minister will be tactful in his closing remarks, because the Department for Work and Pensions wants this process to be done properly and these powers to be devolved in a smooth way. However, the fact remains that these delays are entirely the fault of the Scottish Government and their failure to build capacity to deliver a new social security agency.

Department for Work and Pensions officials have been working hard to devolve these powers since the Scotland Act 2016 was passed. Indeed, they were working towards the 2021 timetable right up until the delay was announced by the Scottish Government. There had been warning signs long before, which should have made the Scottish Government think they had to improve progress. Last year, Audit Scotland warned that Scottish Ministers had not done their homework and had no idea how achievable the plans for Social Security Scotland were. It is already costing more than the Scottish Government thought it would, and plans for local benefits agencies are well behind schedule. It is very clear that the Scottish Government underestimated how complex and expensive it is to deliver a social security system, which is why they have caused these delays.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I hope he agrees that it is very unfortunate that SNP Members have chosen to laugh at elements of what he is saying about an extremely serious issue, rather than focus on the debate. He mentioned the Audit Scotland report. Does he agree that it is wrong of the SNP to claim that it was prepared for this, when Audit Scotland said it had not even worked out how much a new benefits system would cost?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is quite telling that there are only three SNP Members here, given the number of Scottish Conservatives and Scottish Labour party Members. I sense that on this issue, they feel a deep sense of embarrassment about how their Scottish Government colleagues have delivered. They are not bobbing up to make interventions to challenge the points that are being made; instead, they sit and they laugh. The reality is that it is our constituents, the people of Scotland, who are being let down by this Scottish Government failing to deliver.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Lamont: I just want to make a bit more progress. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] Fine, on you go.

Neil Gray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and commend him on securing this debate, as it will give us an opportunity to set out the positive things that the Scottish Government are doing on social security, as I will when I make my speech. The hon. Gentleman is laying all the blame at the Scottish Government’s door. Can he advise the Chamber on how many occasions the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has met with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People in Scotland, or with the joint ministerial committee, and how often those meetings have been cancelled as a result of the Department for Work and Pensions’ failure to engage?

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman is doing his best to try to justify this, but the Secretary of State for Scotland regularly meets officials from the Scottish Government about the devolution of welfare powers.

Neil Gray: Officials.

John Lamont: The Secretary of State and other Ministers in this Government have been working hard, because we recognise how important the continuation of welfare support is to our constituents and the people of Scotland, and that the Scottish Government have failed to deliver as they have promised. These delays are of huge concern to our constituents, because they raise doubt about the Scottish Government’s ability to take on functions of the Department for Work and Pensions and to deliver benefits in Scotland. People are looking at those delays and are rightly asking whether the Scottish Government are up to the job.

Although the Department for Work and Pensions has stepped in to ensure that benefits will be paid notwithstanding the delay, how long can that go on for? It is far from satisfactory for the DWP and Scottish Government to be working to a presumption that social security will be devolved by 2021, only for the Scottish Government to suddenly announce a three-year delay. Perhaps in his closing remarks, the Minister could provide some clarity about whether his Department was made aware of the new timetable, and whether any further delays are anticipated.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. Does he acknowledge the comments that have been made by Inclusion Scotland and the Scottish Commission for Learning Disability about the timetable

for the delivery of Scottish social security powers? Given that those organisations speak for the people who will rely on those powers being delivered effectively, why is the hon. Gentleman so willing to challenge what they have said in welcoming the timetable set out by the Scottish Government?

John Lamont: I am grateful for that point, but it is astonishing—it is a Scottish Government timetable that has slipped. The hon. Gentleman's colleagues in Edinburgh—the Scottish Government, the SNP—said that they would try to put the new welfare system in place by the end of 2020. That deadline then became 2021, and then became 2024. It is an absolute failure by the SNP Scottish Government to deliver and match their promises, and I think supporters of Scotland will judge them when the next election comes.

In the event of any further delays, I am confident that the DWP stands ready to step in, but perhaps the Minister could provide my constituents with some reassurances that that will be the case. There are also questions about the additional cost of these delays. Given that the Scottish Government are meant to be taking on these powers, and are spending considerable money on setting up Social Security Scotland, any extra spending by the DWP is an additional, duplicate cost to the public purse. The welfare system is crucial to the life of many of our constituents, and it is vital that these powers are devolved in an orderly fashion so that nobody falls through the cracks. It is important that a new timetable is developed so that the Scottish Government get ready to take on these powers, and there are no further unexpected delays.

One issue that is unique to my constituency, I think, is about the devolution of cold weather payments. In the Scottish borders, the TD12 and TD15 postcodes include homes on either side of the border. For the purposes of cold weather payments, other postcodes in Northumberland use a weather station in Scotland. Some properties will get their cold weather payment from the Department for Work and Pensions, while others in the same postcode should get theirs from Social Security Scotland. If cold weather payments are eventually to be taken on by the Scottish Government, could the Minister confirm whether there have been any discussions about how those payments will be delivered where postcodes are split across the border?

One final issue concerns other welfare powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament by the Scotland Act 2016. As well as delays to taking on devolved benefits, the Scottish Government seem less than enthusiastic about accepting these powers. The Scotland Act devolves the ability to top up reserved benefits, provide short-term payments and create new non-reserved benefits. UK Ministers have repeatedly made their view clear that these powers allow the Scottish Government to compensate women affected by the equalisation of the state pension age. The Scottish Government do not often accuse the UK Government of giving powers away, so the fact that UK Ministers say that these powers have been devolved is a compelling reason to believe this to be the case.

A more detailed look at the legislation clearly shows that the Scottish Government could act in three ways. First, section 24 provides the Scottish Government with the ability to top up pensions and, therefore, compensate

women affected by this change once they reach the new pension age. This may not be an ideal solution; none the less, the Scottish Government accept it as possible.

Secondly, section 26 allows for payments to provide help with short term needs if payment is required “to avoid a risk” to the person's wellbeing. The Scottish Government claim this requires each case to be individually assessed, but this is simply not true. The legislation allows payment merely to avoid a risk of harm. That is a low threshold. If the Scottish Government's language about the impact of these changes is accurate, the threshold is clearly met.

Thirdly, section 28 allows the Scottish Government to create new non-reserved benefits, except to provide a pension or provide assistance merely by old age. This does not prevent the Scottish Government from taking action, because compensating Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign women before they reach pension age does not amount to a pension nor to assistance due to old age, which, in the context, clearly means the state pension age.

A letter from the then Minister for Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), in 2017 made the Scottish Government aware of this point. My hon. Friend wrote about section 28:

“Whilst this power cannot be used to provide pensions to people who qualify by reason of old age, many of those affected by changes to the state pension age will not have reached state pension age. As a result, this broad power does offer the Scottish Government the possibility of introducing financial support to help this group.”

Clearly, this is another way in which the Scottish Government could step in but fail to do so.

I have huge sympathy for the women affected by this change and I have been working with a number of them in my constituency to help them manage the process. However, I have no time for the SNP's position on this matter, which is completely inconsistent. The SNP might not want to take action to compensate these women; that would be a perfectly legitimate position. The SNP might want to take action but feel it would be too costly; again, that is an entirely legitimate position. It is not legitimate to try and make political capital out of a group of women who clearly feel wronged, and mislead them about the Scottish Government's ability to help.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very eloquent argument as to why the Scottish Government can pick up the WASPI problem, but this matter also rests with the Government. In his view, is the Government's decision not to compensate the WASPI women legitimate or is it democratic?

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point. I support equalisation of pension age. This is how devolution works. Just as we have different policies on prescription charges and university tuition in Scotland, potentially, you could have a different policy in Scotland about how women of a certain age are supported. I support the UK Government's position, but there are options open to the Scottish Government to take a different approach. However, they are exploiting these women for party political purposes and for no other reason.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman has been making great play of the fact that he has the border near his constituency. Why does he believe that women south of that border do not deserve to be compensated because of his Government?

John Lamont: I support the equalisation of the pension age. It is quite astonishing for the hon. Lady to almost deny the devolution settlement. This is how devolution works. Different parts of the United Kingdom can pursue different policy objectives. The hon. Lady is almost arguing for the abolition of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government's ability to take different decisions and pursue different policy objectives. Why not accept that they have the power and ability to take action to compensate those women and support the Scottish Government in taking a different approach if they choose to do so?

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Given that the hon. Gentleman is advocating his support for 1950s-born women, is he in favour of the UK Government's pension credit changes, which will go through in May, which are being referred to by WASPI women as a toy boy tax?

John Lamont: I support the changes. I have supported a number of my constituents. As I have said, the equalisation of the pension age is right. People are living to be older, and it is right that men and women are entitled to their pension at the same age. This is another example of the Scottish Government's failure to take action when it has the power to do so. Despite all the rhetoric demanding more powers, they have an inability to use those powers.

Devolution of welfare by this Conservative Government has made the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the Scottish Government have found taking on those powers such a challenge. The latest delay is surprising, given the SNP's criticism of the system they are inheriting. It is important that the Department for Work and Pensions continues to do all that it can to ensure the orderly transfer of welfare powers and to ensure that the recipients—the people of Scotland; our constituents—continue to receive the support they need.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Seven Members wish to speak, so that is about five minutes each. That is guidance, not an absolute rigid time limit, but please stick to it, otherwise colleagues will not get their fair share.

9.52 am

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is great to see you in the Chair, Mr Betts. If the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) will allow me to refer to him as the hon. Member for Berwickshire, that might save us a little time.

This is a strange debate, because we have two parties—the Conservatives and the SNP—arguing when they are both culpable for why we are here. Since 2010 the social security system has been completely and utterly discredited by a deliberate narrative from the then coalition Government that welfare was a bad thing. They completely

changed the narrative in this place, and indeed in the country, from social security being a safety net to welfare being bad. That is part of the problem we have today.

Between 1997 and 2010, the previous Labour Government created a system that lifted millions of pensioners, and millions and millions of children, out of poverty. We should be incredibly proud of that. Since then, most of that has gone backwards in the name of austerity, which has been a political choice rather than a necessity. Before Conservative Members, if they wish, pop up and go on about the employment statistics, which are welcome, most of the decline in terms of poverty comes from in-work poverty—people actually in work.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I am happy to do so just once.

Stephen Kerr: Surely it is a good thing that there are now fewer children in workless households than ever before. That is good, isn't it?

Ian Murray: It is a fantastic thing, but it is bad that most of those children are in poverty when they were not before. Social security is a sensitive subject, and we must be careful about the language we use.

I want to reflect on what the Smith commission has done. In response to the 2014 independence referendum, a commission was put in place that allowed all the parties to come together to find consensus about what the next stage of devolution to the Scottish Parliament should be in the devolution journey.

I am glad that Members across the House now extol the virtues of sections 24, 25 and 26 of the Scotland Act 2016, because while the Conservatives and SNP argued about the minutiae of what was not in the Bill, Labour were promoting changes at the Dispatch Box. We proposed amendments to put stuff into the Bill that could have been there, such as my amendment 31. The amendments that went through in the House of Lords gave Scotland the power to create its own social security system. The Scottish Government can top up any reserved benefit and create a new benefit in any devolved area; that is incredibly important. That is why it is so frustrating that the devolved powers have been delayed. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Berwickshire mentioned the WASPI issue, because it is a key aspect of the way the whole issue has been dealt with.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman will understand the difficulty and complexity of delivering a combined social security system—one that has to interact with a Department that is putting roadblocks in the way of some of the flexibilities and changes that the Scottish Government are looking to achieve. Can he outline an area where the Scottish Government could have gone more quickly, such as the passage of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018? Could that have been quicker? Is there any area where he thinks things could have moved more quickly than they have?

Ian Murray: That is an interesting intervention. I admit I am not an expert on social security, and I would not claim to be. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the intervention. However, is it not interesting

that, whereas the Scottish National party social security spokesperson was telling everyone in 2014 that an entirely new state could be set up in 18 months, the matters we are discussing have been delayed not twice but three times, in 2016, 2018 and 2019? That was with respect to benefits that the SNP claimed had to be in the Bill and had to be devolved immediately, and that it would be able to deal with.

John Lamont: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I will not, because the Chair has said we have only five minutes.

I wanted to mention the WASPI issue. The WASPI women in my constituency are beside themselves that the issue has not been resolved. Both parties, and both the Scottish and UK Governments, are culpable of robbing WASPI women of the pensions they have worked hard for. Scotland could use the powers at its disposal to take a different course, but its Government refuse to do so, because they would rather create grievance than deal with the issue.

It is important that the people of Scotland know we have an inhumane welfare system across the UK at the moment. Scotland can make a different choice and create its own welfare system. The UK Government have created a situation that means Scotland has the ability to do something different. The SNP Government of Scotland refuse to do so. They have delayed it until 2024—eight years after the passage of the 2016 Act. At the same time, disabled people and WASPI women in Scotland, in particular, are suffering. The SNP Government should hang their head in shame.

9.57 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this important debate.

We have already heard about the foundation Acts of 2016 and 2018, enacted by the UK and Scottish Governments respectively to devolve various welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament and facilitate delivery of the new social security benefit scheme in Scotland. The Scottish Government's website states that

"the benefits we will deliver may be different in nature but there is one common thread which binds them—an investment in the people of Scotland".

I am afraid that that common thread is fraying. Delivery is delayed. The Scottish Government's investment to date is not timeously delivering the promised benefits for the people of Scotland. The Scottish Government will, over time, take on only 10 of the original 11 devolved benefits. The severe disablement allowance remains with the UK's DWP. The transfer of responsibility for a number of other devolved benefits, such as personal independence payments, is on hold—not until tomorrow or next week but until 2024.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman mentioned severe disablement allowance and he will be aware that no new recipient has been admitted to that benefit for 19 years. Can he describe what changes, and what difference, the Scottish Government could make to that area of benefits?

Bill Grant: That is entirely up to the Scottish Government. It is devolved. It is another ball that they have dropped and are not prepared to pick up.

The state of preparedness of the Scottish Government's social security agency is such that it is unable fully to administer and make its annual payments of circa £2.9 billion. The Scottish social security system is apparently failing to fulfil, at least in part, one of its own stated principles, which is

"to be efficient and deliver value for money".

I understand that Audit Scotland is due to report on a further audit, of how effectively the Scottish Government are managing the delivery.

The Scottish Government's stated aim of improving benefits for disabled people and people with ill health is laudable, and I applaud it. However, I note that assessments may not be carried out by the private sector, so there is potential for an already overstretched public sector to inherit that significant, important responsibility. In an earlier debate, I acknowledged previous concerns about the DWP assessments that are carried out by the private sector, and those concerns are being addressed. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions advised in February 2019 that the average wait for an assessment had been reduced by nearly four fifths since July 2014, while the average end-to-end claim journey had been significantly reduced.

Chris Stephens: Would the hon. Gentleman be so kind as to give way?

Bill Grant: No. My concern with the Scottish plan of action is that constituents complain about the public sector, for both the length of time that they have to wait for an NHS appointment and the shortage of specialist medical staff. That said, I fear that either the waiting time for those constituents could increase or the decision-making process for benefit claimants could take longer. I note that the Scottish Government, in response to recent questions, have proposed to do away with some assessments and re-assessments unless there is no other way to obtain information.

In future, constituents need clarity. Will the Minister consider enhancing public awareness of the revised timetable for the Scottish Government—assuming that that is much wanted and desired—in their responsibilities to devolved benefits? The current situation is not good for the people of Scotland who rely on those benefits; it is not good for the Scottish devolution settlement; and it is not good for Scotland. It lies firmly and squarely at the door of the Scottish Government.

10.1 am

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate both the Backbench Business Committee and my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), on securing this most timely debate. We find ourselves discussing the devolution of welfare, and I shall start by echoing some of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray).

What is welfare? It is the bottom line below which we feel that people, as part of our community, should not fall. Somehow in the last 10 years, however, that argument

[*Martin Whitfield*]

has changed to looking at the most vulnerable people, as they are described—rather than people who are in the most vulnerable positions—as being something less, and possibly unworthy. They are certainly seen as a group who should pay for the problems, errors and omissions of the parts of society that led to the economic disaster. That is an appalling state to reach.

Our communities are being fractured enough, with the closures of banks and GP surgeries and the collapse of the high street, but they are now also being asked to turn against themselves and look down their noses at a group of people who find themselves in desperate situations. That is a truly appalling position to be in. I find it disingenuous when I listen to arguments, both in the main Chamber and in this one, in which those people are held up as those who should suffer most for the faults of others.

The Scotland Act and the devolution settlement in Scotland opened up the opportunity for something more. It opened up the opportunity for a fairer and kinder system, and to tailor welfare to the people who are closest to those who make the decisions. We find ourselves arguing over delay and postponement. That is an appalling situation, because those individuals, families and single mothers and children cannot wait for a more humane situation. They come to my surgery on a weekly basis and contact me almost daily. I find it appalling that the set-up of a system has been postponed until 2024.

I ask both the Minister, out of respect—he kindly asked for a civilised debate, which I think that we should have—and the SNP spokesperson: what went wrong? Was it the responsibility of those who advised the Scottish Government, or were flippant statements made with a level of enthusiasm for welfare that could not then be fulfilled? People in Scotland deserve an apology for the situation that they find themselves in. So much was promised and, at present, so little has been delivered.

I know that I have little time, and I would like raise the matter of PIP and epilepsy. Earlier this year, I lodged early-day motion 2124 on epilepsy and PIP payments, particularly in Scotland, where 55,000 people suffer from debilitating seizures, which seriously affect their mental health. Those people had hoped that the PIP system would become fairer and kinder, but they are now looking far into the future for that to occur. Will there be an apology in respect of those people and the situation that they suffer?

I want to ask both the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson about Motability. The Scottish Government have indicated they do not want to take it on, yet it is a benefit that individuals have come to me about. A constituent who suffers from spinal issues fears that the approach of the Scottish Government will be the same as the DWP's and that she will lose the opportunity to use Motability to manage her condition.

Lastly, I seek reassurance on the people who have found themselves falling foul of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. Originally brought in to help deal with terrorist activity, it is now being used to decide whether people are fit to work or are less disabled than they say they are. I met a constituent only last week who was still awaiting a decision so that she can

appeal it. She is trapped in a circle; there are no responses from the DWP, so she cannot appeal a decision. There are no responses from the investigation unit to decide whether any criminal procedures will take place. Locked into that labyrinthine nightmare, she looks to the Scottish Government and asks genuinely whether things will get better. On the evidence that we have heard about the two delays, I fear that that will not be the case.

10.7 am

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and to follow the hon. Member for East Lothian (*Martin Whitfield*), who made his usual thoughtful speech. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (*John Lamont*) for securing this Westminster Hall debate.

I remember the conversation back in September 2014. The SNP had produced its blueprint for an independent Scotland, which it claimed was a White Paper, but, as it has transpired, was a work of pure fiction. Events have proven that beyond doubt. On page 339 of the document there was a timeline for independence, and it put independence day in March 2016. That is a total of 560 days from the date of the referendum to the date of independence: 560 days to set up an entirely new country from scratch. The timeframe would include all the negotiations on how Scotland would withdraw from and have a future relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom. On reflection, how extraordinary those dates and numbers now seem, and how ridiculous, particularly in the light of what has transpired in relation to Brexit.

Today's debate is about the establishment of the devolved Scottish social security system. The Scotland Act devolved the powers and they passed into law on 23 March 2016. The Act delivered on the promise made to the Scottish people about devolving more power to our Parliament. It fulfilled the commitments of the Smith commission, to which all the parties in Scotland contributed and agreed. The noble Lord Smith of Kelvin has confirmed that all the commitments made in the commission's report have been delivered, so the powers in relation to social security should be transferred to the Scottish Government on 1 April 2020, but the SNP will not touch them. It will cost more than £308 million to set up Social Security Scotland. The SNP claimed, just five years ago, that it would cost £200 million to set up the new Scotland that it falsely promised the people of Scotland. In February, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security announced that the Scottish Government would not be in a position to introduce and own the devolved powers until at least 2024.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): My hon. Friend is right that the Scottish Government have not touched the powers. The nub of the issue is this: their only desire is to have the constitutional change of independence, which means using any mechanism at their disposal to attack the UK Government, bash Westminster, and use the politics of grievance rather than come up with solutions to help people.

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend is correct; there is no issue that it is beyond the SNP's powers to politicise and use for its own nationalist agenda. Clearly, these things

are more complex than they seem, and I accept that. I do not really want the SNP taking these powers and using them if it cannot handle them, because we are talking about the lives of the most vulnerable people in Scotland, who deserve to be protected from any possible incompetence on the part of the SNP. The SNP's track record on IT systems alone is a horror story, and the farm payments fiasco is a warning.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman warns of the problems that his constituents could face if this system is not delivered effectively. To his credit, he has been a critic of this Government on universal credit, so does he not think it a tad ironic to be speaking about the potential incompetence of the Scottish Government who are delivering a safe system when his Government have presided over the shambles of universal credit and personal independence payments?

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is someone I respect, but we are talking about the Scottish Government's willingness to accept powers that have been devolved to them, and their unwillingness to touch those powers speaks volumes about them. They will now take until 2024 instead of 2020. That is more than 3,000 days' notice—six times the number of days the SNP told us it would need to set up the new Scotland that it promised the Scottish people in 2014. This is the sad state of affairs of the SNP.

The fact is that the SNP does not want to have to handle these powers, because they are difficult powers to handle. Welfare and benefits are expensive and complex; they need politicians to be grown up, to make difficult decisions and to show leadership. Let us be clear: the next time we hear SNP politicians in this place or elsewhere deriding welfare reform or bemoaning a decision that they view as disadvantageous to their constituents, they will be complicit. The SNP Government could have set up a social security system; they could have grasped the nettle and dealt with this, but, through either political cowardice or sheer incompetence, they have failed the challenge.

The people of Scotland are sick and tired of the SNP and its excuses. Devolution works. The powers are there. It is simply the nationalists who, through their wilful negligence, are leaving Scotland to stagnate.

10.12 am

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for calling this debate, which is timely and important, particularly for me. When full transition happens, I will have the largest number of constituents claiming universal credit of any constituency in Scotland, so it is something that particularly affects my constituents.

I suppose this debate leads us to reflect on why we are in politics and what our purpose is as Members of Parliament. For me, it is about building a country that has the capacity to ensure that the maximum number of its people are able to work, sustain themselves in a dignified way and achieve their opportunity. Enabling everyone to have that opportunity will improve our

collective function as a society and our capability as a country. That is, in essence, what I want to achieve in Parliament and in politics and why I am a member of the Labour party.

Let us look at the record of the last Labour Government on child poverty. In 1998, there were 3 million children in poverty. By the end of the last Labour Government, that had been reduced to 1.6 million. Sadly, under the coalition and pure Conservative Governments since, that figure has risen to 3.7 million. That is shameful; and before there is any hubris from the Conservatives on welfare or social security, I just want to make clear that that is a shameful stain on their record.

That is a function of a society that has seen the narrative of removing the shame from need and the creation of a floor below which none can fall and everyone can rise completely destroyed. The ideal of the Attlee Government in creating the social security foundation that built the welfare state has been thoroughly damaged by this Government. That is the main take-away from this debate and one that cannot be dismissed.

However, I also reflect on 20 years of devolution and the great opportunities that we saw from it. I still remember, as a nine-year-old, watching the opening of the Scottish Parliament and that parade down the Royal Mile, and the great optimism in the immediate aftermath of a Labour Government coming to power, as well as the great opportunities sensed by people. The Parliament was built not just for the inherent right to have a Scottish Parliament, but as a functional thing that would achieve objectives. In my opinion, one of the key objectives was to have an effective bulwark against a future Tory Government that might attack the fundamentals of our social security system and welfare state.

The Scotland Act 2016 was passed in that spirit. That was due in no small part to the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), who fought valiantly to ensure key amendments to the Bill, in particular the power to top up reserved benefits, which gives the Scottish Government a significant measure of autonomy. That autonomy is combined with the great opportunity of the United Kingdom's fiscal union, which each year delivers £10.2 billion extra for Scotland—£1,900 per person—to invest in the economy and public services. That would not be achievable under independence. Therefore, the Scottish Parliament has been pump-primed with a great measure of financial capability to achieve change in the face of an onslaught by the Conservatives, who wish to cut the fabric of our society and our public services.

With this delay we have seen a huge failure to live up to the expectations of devolution. Around 60% of all social security has now been devolved, with the exclusion of the state pension, which is an automatic stabiliser. That is a huge opportunity for Scotland. There have been some improvements, such as the ban on private sector involvement in assessments, but that was thanks to Labour's campaigning efforts in the Scottish Parliament. There was a commitment to reduce face-to-face assessments—that was a Green proposal—and short-term assistance is now paid if an award is reduced and the applicant subsequently asks for a review or appeal.

However, we have also seen the Tories and SNP unite in Holyrood to vote down a £5 per week top-up to child benefit, by using the Social Security (Scotland) Bill and the budget processes. There has been an endorsement

[Mr Paul Sweeney]

for the uprating cuts, which has blocked Labour's move to revert to the retail prices index when uprating carer's allowance. The 2011 cut based on the consumer prices index has cost carers £1,000 since 2011, while Tory uprating cuts have cost Scots £1.9 million in the past decade. Those are just some examples of a complete failure to live up to expectations. We need radical and effective measures, which is what we seek to propose, and we encourage all parties to live up to the expectations that people had when devolution was first delivered 20 years ago.

10.18 am

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing this debate.

Government figures illustrate that 1 million people in Scotland now live in relative poverty, which equates to one in every five Scots. They also highlight that 240,000 children in Scotland are living in poverty, two thirds of whom come from working households. The Independent Food Aid Network found that more than 480,000 crisis food parcels were distributed by Scottish food banks between April and September 2018, which included 27,000 parcels in North Lanarkshire and in my constituency. The Government are presiding over a crisis of in-work poverty, child poverty and food poverty, and their policies are directly contributing to that with the failing roll-out of universal credit and the unjust benefits freeze.

The central purpose of devolution is to give the Scottish Government a chance to take different decisions, yet the SNP Scottish Government are far too timid in their ambitions for a devolved social security system. Eleven benefits have been devolved, including PIP and DLA, which are worth more than £3 billion to Scots every year. The Scottish Government have shown no sign that they are prepared to take responsibility for those benefits, having twice asked the DWP to delay devolving them. Scottish Government Ministers now admit that the full devolution of benefits will not be completed until 2024, leaving hundreds of thousands of Scottish claimants to languish under the welfare reforms of this Tory Government.

I should stress that I welcome some of the positive changes that the Scottish Government are seeking to make to the devolved social security system. I am pleased that the responsibility for evidence gathering for assessments will be shifted away from claimants. I am glad that short-term assistance will be paid to those who find their awards reduced or who are challenging decisions through the appeals process, and I welcome the commitment to reduce the number of face-to-face assessments. However, I continue to have concerns that much of what is wrong with the current UK welfare reforms will remain in place in the new devolved social security system. There will be no changes to the rate of benefits. The current points-based system and assessment indicators for PIP will be retained, and the mandatory reconsideration process will not be reformed in any meaningful way.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the PIP points-based system staying the same. In many constituencies the change from DLA to

the PIP-based system has meant huge losses for people. In my constituency, it amounts to £2 million a year. Does he not agree that that is shameful? Surely the Scottish Government could take action immediately to resolve it.

Hugh Gaffney: That is indeed something that the Scottish Government could do. They want to be the Scottish power. They talk down here about "owning Scotland". Well, start owning Scotland and start making changes to help people—our constituents.

The SNP has voted against topping up child benefit by £5 a week and against reverting to uprating carer's allowance by RPI, and failed to mitigate the two-child limit. In the Scottish Parliament, Labour has already secured legal guarantees that the devolved social security system will have automatic split payments for universal credit and a ban on private sector involvement in assessments. We have committed to using the full powers available to take action, such as topping up child benefit, mitigating the two-child limit and bringing forward the income supplement that families across Scotland so desperately need. While I welcome the devolution of welfare, there is little point if the Scottish Government are not prepared to use their powers. That is why a Scottish Labour Government, committed to using those powers, are so desperately needed. If we are to tackle the crisis of poverty, make Scotland Labour.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I am going to start the winding up speeches at 10.28 am.

10.22 am

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate and to be the first woman called. Although we have had some interesting perspectives from men, it is important to note that welfare affects women disproportionately. We have women who are still mainly carers, women in low-paid jobs, who will often be working all the hours they can get while also caring for their children or perhaps elderly relatives, and also women affected by Government pension decisions, which have again been squabbled over. It is women who are affected by many of these policies, so I am glad to be able to speak.

I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this debate. It is encouraging to see many of his colleagues here. However, when I listen to much of the arguments, I think about my constituents who come to my office every week, some of them in dire situations. They need support and advice, and often they need help. I think about one constituent, a young woman called Kelly, who is a fantastic woman. She is a working single mum in education who is currently on universal credit. She told me that she was once left with £6 in a month, which was supposed to support her and her young son. She was not sure why that had happened; it was not explained to her. She did not come to me and say, "Who should I point the finger at? Is this the Tories or the SNP? Which Government should I be angry at?" She just wanted it to be sorted out. She just wants a welfare system that works, so when I sit here and hear this blame game, it is very frustrating, because it is not really helping her.

We have heard a lot about the delay in devolving welfare powers that the Scottish Government have presided over. I will not go into that, because it has been well

covered, but we have also heard about some of the changes that are not actually changes. We hear that the SNP wants more powers, but what is the point if it will not use them to improve things?

The recent consultation on disability assistance in Scotland and the position papers published just last month showed that the Scottish Government's plan is to replicate much of the existing Tory-designed benefit system. Given that we hear criticisms of that system from SNP spokespeople, why do they want to keep much of the same? Severe disablement allowance is being devolved in name only and then outsourced back to the DWP, which is mind boggling.

I always call for more working together, and there has been some on this issue; however, I fear it has not been very positive. As some of my Labour colleagues mentioned, the SNP and the Tories have worked together in the Scottish Parliament to vote down a policy that would have supported 4,000 families and lifted 5,000 children out of poverty, yet cost the Scottish Government only 0.2% of their budget. There has to be a better way.

Labour has been leading the fight to improve social security for people in Scotland. For example, Scottish Labour pushed the Scottish Government to accept automatic split payments of universal credit—something that the SNP has now embraced and often takes credit for, despite voting against the initial move to amend the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 at stage 2, voting with the Tories. It remains unclear how split payments will be administered in Scotland. Will the Minister update us on that? What is the current timetable for implementing them in Scotland, and have the Scottish Government proposed a split formula?

The Minister and the SNP spokespeople in Westminster and in the Scottish Government need to work together to find a genuine way forward. I want to see less blame and more action to deliver for Kelly, my constituent, and the people who come to my office in need of help and a better system, because there is a better way.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We move on to the Front Benchers, who will each have 10 minutes. That will leave a couple of minutes for the mover of the motion to wind up. I call Neil Gray for the SNP.

10.27 am

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Betts. It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you, my Finance Committee colleague, in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing the debate, as it gives us an opportunity to talk about the great work being done by the SNP Scottish Government—

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: At least let me get started.

With support from other parties and brilliant stakeholders in Scotland, we are working to build our new social security system. I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk has a newfound interest in this area. Until now, he does not appear to have had much of an interest in the work and pensions brief since arriving in this House. A quick look at his speaking record shows that he has

never mentioned universal credit or employment support allowance, and has raised personal independence payments—[*Interruption.*] I will not be shouted down, Mr Betts. The hon. Gentleman has raised personal independence payments just once, which, given the case that I and other colleagues have in this area, I find surprising.

If other search terms are entered, however, the number of mentions made by the hon. Gentleman rockets up. “The Scottish Government” gets 242 mentions, “the Scottish National party” gets 37, “the SNP” gets 116 and “independence” gets 43. That is quite the contrast. Those speaking records perhaps speak not just to his intentions today, but more to what he regards as his purpose in this place: not so much being part of a bloc of Scottish Tories holding this shambles of a British Government to account, but trying to do the job that he left as an Opposition Member of the Scottish Parliament.

I will tackle some of what the hon. Gentleman said and highlight some of what he conveniently forgot to say. I note that he did not once mention how the Scottish Government could safely deliver the new system any faster. I think we were right, having learned from the unsafe and disastrous delivery of universal credit and the personal independence payment, to take our time, do this properly and deliver it safely for our constituents who depend on it.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman speaks about delivering functions in Scotland. Could he perhaps advise Westminster Hall how the SNP has done when it has tried to deliver things in Scotland—for example, paying our Scottish farmers, delivering i6, the IT system for Police Scotland, or delivering a social security system? Is it not the fact that it is failure, failure, failure under the SNP?

Neil Gray: I wish to put on record my congratulations to the hon. Gentleman and his wife on the safe delivery of their new born—I think this is the first chance I have had to put that on record. He has a bit of cheek when he talks about farmers, given the way that the Tory Government robbed Scottish farmers of their convergence uplift money. I do not think that is a safe area of ground for him to be campaigning on.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk described the timetable that the Scottish Government have come forward with as a failure, despite it being welcomed by Inclusion Scotland and the Scottish Commission for Learning Disability. I challenge him to point out the areas of contradiction with those organisations, which speak for those who depend on the safe delivery of this system.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) was right that the Scottish Government can do something different, and we are. We are creating a system that is based on dignity and respect, which I think is something that the Scottish Government and the Labour party agree on. We are looking to do something different in Scotland, which is why we have been working together in Holyrood on so many areas, in order to deliver that system. However, the hon. Gentleman did not answer how the system could have been delivered more quickly and fairly, so I am happy to allow him to intervene and describe that.

Ian Murray: The narrative from the SNP Scottish Government has always been, rightly, about generating a new system that is more respectful of its claimants. Can the hon. Gentleman lay out why the Scottish Government are completely refusing to do anything about the WASPI women?

Neil Gray: That is not actually true, and the hon. Gentleman knows it. We have been campaigning very hard in Westminster for the problem faced by the WASPI women to be sorted across the United Kingdom. He constantly talks about not having any differences between people in Livingston and people in Liverpool; we are in agreement on that. This issue should be sorted out for those women across the United Kingdom, and his ire should be directed at the Minister to resolve the situation.

The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) asked why there was a delay. Again, we have been working hard to deliver the system as quickly and safely as possible, but sadly there has been intransigence on the part of DWP Ministers. There has been good engagement—*[Interruption.]* No, it is not nonsense. There has been a good level of engagement at official level, but successive Secretaries of State have missed joint ministerial working group meetings and refused to allow the Scottish Government to utilise some of their powers, such as separate payments, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. There are areas where we are looking to make changes and develop new policy, but sadly the DWP is putting roadblocks in the way of that progress.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who to his credit has been critical of this Government on the roll-out of universal credit, has not quite taken his concerns in that area to their logical conclusion when it comes to the safe delivery of a new devolved system. We have learned from the shambles of the poverty-inducing roll-out of universal credit and the problems with personal independence payments, and we are determined to deliver the new system safely. It benefits and supports the people of Scotland.

John Lamont: Last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) secured a debate on the delivery of welfare. In criticising that debate, the hon. Gentleman said:

“Of course, the Scottish Government are proceeding quite nicely as they build the new Scottish social security agency.”—*[Official Report, 20 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 119WH.]*

Does he stand by his comments in last year’s debate?

Neil Gray: Yes, I do. The hon. Gentleman is a former Member of the Holyrood Parliament, so he knows how quickly legislation can progress through Parliament, and he knows the steps that need to go through in order—*[Interruption.]* I will not be shouted down. The hon. Gentleman knows how legislation goes through Holyrood, and knows that these things take time. Sadly, we are now, thanks to the intransigence of DWP Ministers, in a position whereby certain things are being delayed. I go back to the point that the hon. Gentleman had never mentioned universal credit and had mentioned PIP once before today’s debate. I am very surprised at that. He does not seem to have a problem with the delay—

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: No, I am answering the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk first. He does not appear to have a problem with the delay or the problems in the roll-out of universal credit or the roll-out of PIP. He has never mentioned those before, despite the constituency case load that I imagine he has in those two areas, yet he uses this place as a battering ram to criticise the Scottish Government. That says more—*[Interruption.]* That says more about the hon. Gentleman’s intentions than it does about the Scottish Government’s.

Chris Stephens: I have listened to this gang of Trumpists shout and bawl and try to shout people down. Does my hon. Friend agree that the main issue, the real issue, is that the DWP and Social Security Scotland will truly share clients? Not once have we heard from a Conservative in this debate about clients—about people, about the poor—and what that means. The Conservatives have completely ignored the fact that universal credit is being delayed to 2023, which will have a real impact on all claimants.

Neil Gray: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He serves on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, so he knows these issues well. Of course, what the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk and some others in the debate forgot to talk about was the fine work that the SNP Scottish Government, as a minority Government, have achieved by gaining cross-party consensus to protect the people of Scotland from the worst damage being inflicted by this poverty-inducing Tory Government. The hon. Gentleman’s constituents do not need to pay the bedroom tax and can still receive council tax benefit. If they are in receipt of carer’s allowance, they will have had a significant uplift in their payments. They can still get access to education maintenance allowance. Some 316,000 low-income households in crisis in Scotland have been helped to buy essential items, such as nappies, food and cookers, through the Scottish welfare fund—a local crisis grant system almost completely abolished elsewhere by the Tories. And we have set a clear path to deliver a new—sadly, it is limited to just 15% of spend—social security system based on dignity and respect. That is all with 55% of taxpayers in Scotland paying less than they would elsewhere in the UK. It is a more progressive tax system that sees those at the top paying a little more and those on the lowest incomes paying a little less.

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: I am concluding.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk also forgot to mention the catastrophic introduction of universal credit and PIP, which has literally ruined lives. He calls a debate to attack a responsible Government making responsible progress to deliver a fairer social security system, but ignores the tragedy of his own party’s disgusting attack on low-income families. He ignores disabled people having their Motability cars removed. He ignores people on universal credit left in poverty. He ignores a freeze on benefits that is predicted to plunge 400,000 more children into poverty. So forgive me, Mr Betts, but the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and the people of Scotland will take no

lessons from the hon. Gentleman or any other Tory party member preaching about how to deliver a social security system.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I call Mike Amesbury for the Opposition. [*Interruption.*] Order. Calm down a bit, please.

10.38 am

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. It was almost a “Get the popcorn out” moment there.

I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing such an important debate. He is on record as saying:

“Devolution has been a good thing for Scotland”

because it has

“the potential to bring power and decision makers closer to the people.”

That principle is a rare example of something that I can agree on with him. It is a historical reality that the Labour party and the late Donald Dewar were the architects of this landscape—a legacy that has strengthened the voice of Scotland and democracy in the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) made me realise my age when he pointed out that he was just nine years old at that time.

To Labour Members, two things are clear from this debate. First, devolution of powers alone is not enough; we need an Administration willing and able to use the powers available to them, with a defining mission to reduce poverty and the political drive from the centre to get on with it and not to delay, delay and delay. Secondly, while devolution of particular policies may be a positive step, as we can all agree, it does not absolve the Conservative party, which conceived, developed and delivered a poor, failing policy here in Westminster, of responsibility for its effects elsewhere.

The Tory Government, as has been pointed out by Opposition Members, have used social security as a vehicle for cuts, with more than £37 billion taken away from UK citizens since 2010—£3.7 billion taken away from Scottish citizens. The effects and consequences of universal credit, as was rightly pointed out by most Opposition Members who have spoken, are a direct result of the Conservative party’s designing and pressing ahead with a policy that is deliberately under-resourced, cruel and unfair. That policy is causing hardship across the United Kingdom, and Labour Members are all too familiar with the effects on our constituents.

Those effects continue to be felt strongly in Scotland, but they have not been mitigated by the SNP-led Scottish Government, even though they have the power to do so. That is a cause for great regret and disappointment for Scotland’s Labour Members of Parliament and Members of the Scottish Parliament.

Stephen Kerr: It is a great disappointment that in a debate on such an important topic, the SNP Members—who are the Scottish Government—did not even bother to turn up. Only the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), their spokesman, has been here for the whole debate. They have come in and out like a

magic roundabout, but they have not stayed for the debate. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a shame on the SNP?

Mike Amesbury: The hon. Gentleman has made his point.

Mitigation is essential, and a lack of it is a cause for unnecessary hardship and continuing poverty. It certainly shames both the Westminster and Holyrood Governments that that continues. Although legal powers to run benefits in Scotland will pass to the Scottish Government in April 2020 as a result of the Scotland Act 2016, the SNP-led Administration have wilfully delayed using those powers in full until 2024.

The spend accounts for some 16% of welfare, or £3 billion. As has been pointed out by Government Members, the SNP is a party that claims it can create an independent state in 18 months. Twice, SNP Ministers have asked the Department for Work and Pensions to delay devolving social security, in 2016 and 2018, which means that, over the next five years, we will have a ludicrous situation in which SNP Ministers will, effectively, send millions of pounds down south to pay the DWP to run social security provision in Scotland.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the absurdity, if the DWP is so evil and malevolent, of the Scottish Government’s effectively paying it to continue to administer the system. Even after the full transition has happened under the revised timescale of 2024, severe disablement allowance will still be outsourced to the DWP and still visiting harm on the Scottish people. Surely that is an absurdity?

Mike Amesbury: Yes; it is another failing of fine and warm words but nothing happening in reality.

While those agency arrangements are in place, SNP Ministers are blocked from making changes to any of the benefits the DWP delivers. They are not able to intervene in aggressive debt recovery or even to change the inflation measure to uprate benefits. While the SNP dithers and sits on its hands, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) has pointed out, thousands of families are falling into poverty every year. Both parties are concentrating on avoiding responsibility, rather than using what levers of power are available to change the failing policy.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman rightly talks about the high poverty levels that we have throughout the United Kingdom. However, will he reflect on the fact that the poverty rate in Scotland—although far too high—is significantly lower than elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and that that might have something to do with the different policies that are being pursued in Scotland to ensure that we eradicate poverty as quickly as possible?

Mike Amesbury: I know the hon. Gentleman will agree that a million people in poverty in Scotland is still shameful—

Neil Gray: I just said that.

Mike Amesbury: If I may continue, when we have seen SNP and Tory politicians working together, they have done so in an alliance, preventing any significant improvements to social security in Scotland.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time, and is making an excellent speech. We have talked about mitigating factors in the Scottish Parliament, but some of the key mitigating factors, such as mitigating the bedroom tax, were implemented only after significant and persistent Labour pressure. Indeed, John Swinney, who was finance Minister at the time, said that he did not want to let the Tories off the hook; he would rather the Scottish people suffered to make a political point.

Mike Amesbury: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the excellent record of Labour in Scotland, campaigning to change things for people on the ground.

Together, SNP and Tory politicians repeatedly voted down a £5 a week top-up to child benefit during the passage of the Social Security (Scotland) Bill and the budget process. In February, they endorsed George Osborne's uprating cuts, blocking Scottish Labour's move to revert to RPI uprating of the carer's allowance. During the recent budget, the SNP refused to mitigate the two-child limit—a policy that would have supported 4,000 families and lifted 5,000 children out of poverty, and would have cost just 0.2% of the Scottish budget. After years of warm words and claims that it will build a system based on human rights, the SNP relied on the Tories to block the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights from being included in the social security Bill.

Labour Members know the effects of Tory welfare policy all too well, wherever in the United Kingdom we represent. We have heard about those effects today: my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian argued that we need bold action for women born in the 1950s, and was right to highlight the woeful response of the Tory Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) argued that in-work poverty is a major problem in Scotland, as well as out-of-work poverty, with over a million people in Scotland living in poverty. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) attacked the political choice of austerity, and called for a social security system that draws on the founding principles of the Attlee Government: security, opportunity and dignity. My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) correctly pointed out that she needs to be the champion of women in this place, because women are disproportionately affected by that political choice of austerity—a choice made by this Tory Government.

Labour believes that the Tories' approach to welfare is flawed and failing. It is a story of failure that begins with the Tory Government in Westminster's cruel and unnecessary welfare policies, but has been worsened by the decision by the SNP Government in Holyrood not to use their powers to effectively mitigate those policies. As a result, it is a story of hardship and hunger, wherever in the UK a person is affected.

My questions to the Minister are simple. First, will he accept that universal credit is failing? It is cruel in design, it is under-resourced, and its roll-out needs to be halted. How about scrapping the benefit freeze, the two-child limit and the five-week wait? Hardship is hardship, wherever we are in the UK. Finally, will the Minister confirm whether the devolution of welfare to Scotland could have happened earlier, had the Scottish Government not asked the Department for Work and

Pensions to delay the process twice, in 2016 and 2018? The only way we will change things is by having a Labour Government.

10.49 am

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing this important and timely debate. He spoke with great passion. He cares deeply about his constituents and he wants an effective welfare system in Scotland that leaves no one behind, which is something that we all want to see. We have heard passionate speeches. If I have time I will refer to some of the points raised. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for their contributions today.

To reiterate the context of where we are—colleagues have set this out—the Scotland Act 2016 provided a significant shift in the way that welfare would be delivered. As has been said, we are transferring responsibility for an estimated £2.8 billion of welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament, which currently support around 1.4 million people in Scotland. That will of course have a major impact on people living in Scotland as we move into a shared welfare space for the first time.

We should not underestimate the significance of the task. We recognise that responsibility for many vulnerable claimants will be transferred to the Scottish Government, and it is vital that both Governments get it right. The DWP has been instrumental in the Scottish Government's delivery to date of certain benefits, and we will continue to support them to achieve their plans. We must ensure that the transfer of the welfare powers proceeds in a safe and secure manner with the claimant at the heart of what we do. That is why we have established strong Government structures, including a joint ministerial working group on welfare and joint working practices to oversee the transfer of powers and to ensure that we work together to identify and mitigate any issues that arise.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) raised points about the ministerial working group. As he knows, there was a recent meeting that was both cordial and constructive. In terms of the support from DWP, we have approximately 80 DWP staff working exclusively on the Scottish devolution programme. Between 2015 and October 2018, DWP managed more than 2,297 requests for information from the Scottish Government. I gently point out to him that I do not think there is any intransigence on our part. He knows that I am happy to take up cases, and we are meeting later today to discuss a constituency case that he has.

Following Royal Assent to the Scotland Act 2016, the DWP has worked hard to support the Scottish Government in the transfer of powers. We have given them access to DWP payment and customer information systems to support their delivery, as well as providing training and knowledge transfer as they build up their capability. We have provided support to enable them to deliver their new employment support programme, Fair Start Scotland, with DWP work coaches making the majority of referrals.

As we approach the first anniversary of the programme, the Scottish Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills has recently written to me to praise our staff in Jobcentre

Plus for the work that they have done to date. It is important that politicians talk not only about the challenges. Of course we should challenge each other to get things right, but we should also praise and acknowledge good joint working when it takes place.

Since 2017, we have also delivered Universal Credit Scottish Choices, giving people in Scotland a choice over the frequency of their payment and whether their housing element is paid directly to their landlord. We supported the Scottish Government to deliver their first new benefit, the best start grant, and we are on track to support delivery of their replacement for funeral expenses payments later this year. Critically, since September 2018, we have been paying carer's allowance on behalf of the Scottish Government, enabling them to pay a six-monthly supplementary payment to carers in Scotland.

Neil Gray: The Minister is setting out well some of the areas where there has been good working between the Scottish and UK Governments, particularly at ministerial level, as I said in my speech. I should put on the record that there have previously been problems at ministerial level between the two Governments, but in the most recent exchange of letters the Secretary of State appears to make a more conciliatory and helpful suggestion for work going forward. So I hope that the two Governments will be able to work together constructively, whereas previously that has not happened.

Alok Sharma: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Over the past few years we have been working constructively, and we want that to continue. My hon. Friends definitely want that. They come in to see me and the Secretary of State regularly to raise issues, and it is right that we continue in that spirit.

Many lessons have been learned in the first wave of devolution, such as in the transfer of accountability of carer's allowance, where the DWP continues to pay carer's allowance on behalf of the Scottish Government but under the same rules and rates as for people in England and Wales. It is vital that we consider these lessons as we move forward with the next wave of delivery.

Stephen Kerr: Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I will not, if my hon. Friend does not mind, because time is short.

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) criticised the Government's delivery of universal credit. I believe it is working, and we have put in an extra £6 billion to support the most vulnerable in the past two Budgets, which unfortunately he has not been able to support in votes. I point him to the summary of a Public Accounts Committee report from 2005 on tax credits, which says:

"In April 2004, the Committee reported on the severe problems following the introduction of the New Tax Credits, which meant that several hundred thousand claimants were not paid on time."

I gently point out that we all want to get the system right, and I am not sure that constantly criticising is the best way forward.

As colleagues have noted, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People recently announced the Scottish Government's delivery timetable for their replacements to the current disability, carer's and industrial

injuries benefits, as well as replacements for winter fuel and cold weather payments. The timetable proposes that the Scottish Government will progressively take over responsibility for delivery from April next year, with the final cases being transferred by 2024. That reflects the pace that the Scottish Government believe that they can commit to and is achievable.

On timing, it will be for the Scottish Government to keep it under review. The Scottish Government's plans involve considerable work for DWP in both supporting them to achieve their ambition and, as necessary, continuing to deliver benefits on their behalf. We share the Scottish Government's commitment to a safe and secure transfer, and our priority is as seamless a transfer as possible from the person receiving the benefit's point of view.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk raised a number of issues in his remarks. He spoke of his concerns about the Scottish Government's delivery plans, the continuity of provision for his constituents and the cost to the public purse from the DWP continuing to deliver devolved benefits on behalf of the Scottish Government. We will, of course, continue to work with the Scottish Government, and costs arising from the DWP's delivery of services on behalf of the Scottish Government will be reimbursed by the Scottish Government.

Many other points were raised, and if colleagues want to write to me I will be happy to respond to them. A number of colleagues mentioned WASPI. It is for the Scottish Government to determine how to use their powers to make further payments, including to fix issues for those individuals.

The devolution of welfare powers represents a significant constitutional change that will require substantial work by both Governments to ensure that the people of Scotland are well served. We are committed to working constructively with the Scottish Government. I look forward to the future and seeing the Scottish Government successfully delivering their new social security benefits for the people of Scotland.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I thank the Minister and other colleagues for keeping within the time limit. John Lamont has a minute to wind up.

10.59 am

John Lamont: I am grateful to all hon. Members who contributed. It is telling that we had only one substantive speech from the Nationalist benches; the other 34 SNP Members obviously find it very uncomfortable. I have a lot of respect for the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), but it is telling how much time he spent in preparing for this debate counting off how often I have spoken in this place and how many words I have mentioned; never mind trying to defend the Scottish Government's record. It is more about a social media clip than anything else. The Scottish Government are always pleading for more powers and control over welfare, but it has taken them nine years to get 15% of welfare, so it would take 60 years for them to get full control over the welfare budget.

I am grateful to the Minister for his response. Our job is to ensure that our constituents—the people of Scotland—are getting the welfare support that they

[John Lamont]

deserve, and I am pleased that the UK Government are taking action to deal with the failures of the Scottish Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered devolution of welfare.

Waste Incineration: Regulation

11.00 am

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regulation of the incineration of waste.

It is particularly pleasing to open this short debate this morning for three reasons. First, it is good to talk about anything other than Brexit. Secondly, it is good to have a fellow Yorkshireman in the Chair and as Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which is looking at the Government's waste strategy in a short inquiry. Thirdly—I hope we can reach some consensus across the Chamber—this debate is inspired by two rising stars. I am glad to see one of them, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), in his place. He is the first ever shadow Minister for Waste and Recycling combined. The second, who not in his place as he has other business today, is the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. When I pointed out at Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions recently that new incinerators could divert waste that might otherwise be recycled, he said I had a good point. That is perhaps the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me during questions. I am particularly glad for those three reasons.

I wish to put three propositions to the Chamber. First, there is a case for a moratorium on incineration. We have quite enough incinerators to deal with residual waste at the moment. Secondly, the Environment Agency should be more robust in its approach in enforcing the waste hierarchy. Thirdly, the Treasury should continue to look—as it has been doing publicly in recent months—at whether a tax on incineration should mirror the landfill tax.

I acknowledge at the beginning that there are many Members in the Chamber today and I will happily take interventions. There is an organisation called the UK Without Incineration Network that is to be commended on the quality of the information it provides. Indeed, in reporting on an industry conference, an industry paper said that if Paul Davidson, who is a strong lobbyist for incinerators,

“wanted technical and other details”

about individual incinerators,

“he went to the website of implacable opponents UKWIN.”

Mr Davidson was reported as saying

“It's a great website. It's a disgrace that that is the best source of information.”

When I form my first Administration, the organisation's chief co-ordinator, Shlomo Downen, will be the first person I will recommend for a peerage.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. There is no doubt it will be lively. He has just hit the nail on the head. When incinerator operators apply for licences from the Environment Agency, a lot of bureaucratic and complicated paperwork goes with that that prevents local residents from scrutinising some of these applications. Does he agree with me that more needs to be done to unpick that information to make it more accountable and transparent for local residents?

John Grogan: I agree. Many residents feel that the Environment Agency's job seems to be to try and do everything possible to nod through the application rather than rigorously interrogate it. Indeed, as I pointed out in my opening remarks, the Environment Agency has responsibilities under the Waste Regulations (England and Wales) 2011, passed by the coalition, to enforce the waste hierarchy, which puts reuse and recycling at the top. It fails to do this.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): In my constituency of Swansea East, in the very pleasant community of Llansamlet, Biffa is currently attempting to get permission to build one of those incinerators and 2,500 members of the local community have come together to object. Does my hon. Friend agree that placing such a facility in the middle of a community is detrimental to its health, schools and homes and that we should be looking at other ways of disposing of our waste?

John Grogan: I am quite shocked by that application, but it mirrors an application in the centre of Keighley, to which I will refer in my closing remarks.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene in this brilliant debate. I agree with his propositions, particularly on the waste hierarchy and the likelihood that incinerators will reduce both the amount that we recycle and our attempts to reduce waste in the first place. Does he agree that there is a risk, through so-called gasification, that we may have incineration by another means, and that it is absolutely right that applications should be considered—if they are to be considered at all—only if they are away from centres of population, on the precautionary principle?

John Grogan: I agree absolutely with the hon. Gentleman on the precautionary principle. However one defines incineration, it is true that the more of it there is in a local authority, the less recycling there is.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Some 7,000 constituents in Carnbroe rejected this for 11 years, and the council fully backs the community. The Scottish Government keep overturning that decision, however, and keep coming back. Will anyone listen to the communities who actually have to live with the incinerators?

John Grogan: My hon. Friend makes a point and in a moment I will briefly set out the case for a moratorium on new incinerators, which I think is definitely needed.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): At the moment, my constituents are very worried about proposals for a new incinerator the size of Battersea power station in the Hampshire downs countryside, which is a rural location, not an urban one. It would be in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), whom it is good to see in her place. Given that incineration is not recycling and the proposals would lead to countless lorry movements just to feed the machine, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be good to hear from the Minister about where the Government see incineration in the hierarchy of waste management in England today?

John Grogan: I, like the hon. Gentleman, am looking forward to the Minister's remarks. As I said, I do not think that the Environmental Agency has done nearly enough to enforce that waste hierarchy, to which all parties are committed.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend knows that I have a long-term interest in the sector. Indeed, he can check the Register of Members' Financial Interests—I have always been interested in energy from waste. He should be very cautious about calling it "incineration". Energy from waste is at its best—looking at Sheffield or the new power plant in Leeds—when, for most of the town or city, it not only feeds into the electricity supply, but is a large contributor to it. On the other hand, if the heat is retained and heats the whole of the centre of Sheffield, as it does, it is a very valuable part of the balance that we need. We can never recycle everything, and if we do not have that balance between good quality energy from waste, recycling and minimising throwing stuff in holes in the ground, we are lost. I would love that sort of facility in my constituency, where we have an old-fashioned incinerator, but all the heat goes out into the atmosphere.

John Grogan: I say to my hon. Friend that I used to chair the last but one coalmine to close in this country; Hatfield Colliery, in Yorkshire. Incinerators actually emit more CO₂ per megawatt-hour generated than any other fossil fuel source, including coal. On CO₂ and global warming grounds alone, we must consider that.

I will go back to my remarks about whether we have enough incinerators. Only one independent analysis is widely respected: Eunomia's. It is an environmental consultant with expertise in this area that has issued 12 reports, the last of which was published in July 2017. The analysis clearly demonstrates that operational incineration capacity has grown rapidly, from 6.3 million tonnes in 2009-10, to 13.5 million tonnes in 2017. Additional capacity is assessed to be 4.8 million tonnes.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate that many councils and local authorities are entering contracts relating to providers of incineration. In doing so, they are diverting waste that should be recycled, because of those contractual agreements. That is creating a big problem.

John Grogan: The hon. Gentleman hits the nail on the head. It creates a perverse incentive for local authorities which, on the one hand, have a duty to recycle, but on the other must fulfil a contract that they have entered into. That means that when Eunomia did the analysis it looked at a series of projections, assessing the capacity of the incinerators against the availability of the feedstock of waste. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), I would point out the assumed levels of recycling to which we are committed in Yorkshire in particular. We are committed to a recycling rate of 55% by 2025, 60% by 2030, and 65% by 2035. Eunomia and, indeed, the Government have accepted that we will have enough incineration capacity to meet the residual waste, given those recycling targets. Tom Murray, the deputy head of resources and waste policy at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said this year:

"Our evidence is suggesting that, when we meet recycling targets...recycling will leave no capacity gap" with respect to incineration.

Mr Sheerman: Before my hon. Friend moves on from recycling, will he give way? He is a good friend of mine.

John Grogan: Just because my hon. Friend is a very good friend: I have only a few minutes left, so I can take a short intervention.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend knows that his local authority's recycling is pathetic, as is mine. My challenge for him is, if energy from waste is stopped, what will we do with the non-recyclable plastics that are pouring into every town and city in the country?

John Grogan: The way I would help local authorities to recycle more would be to tax incinerators, just as landfill is taxed, to give them the money to increase recycling rates. That is being considered by the Treasury at the moment. The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury said recently that the Treasury

"would be willing to consider a future incineration tax once further infrastructure has been put in place to reduce...the amount of plastics that are incinerated, further improving the environment and reducing the amount of throwaway single-use plastics."—[*Official Report, Finance (No. 3) Public Bill Committee*, 6 December 2018; c. 299.]

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): On the point about incinerator tax, does the hon. Gentleman agree that in situations where, as in my constituency, there is a proposal for a major incinerator yards outside the constituency boundary, and local people feel they have no ownership to enable them to affect the outcome, whether through their MP or councillors, it is particularly important that any tax that might come in should be shared broadly with neighbouring communities, and not just in the council area where the incinerator is?

John Grogan: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. There are precedents that can be looked at, such as the landfill tax. However, I hope that the Government—any Government—will rapidly bring the matter to a conclusion, to give certainty. Instead of just flirting with the idea of taxation it is now time to act on it.

If the House will indulge me, in my remaining couple of minutes I need to refer to the outstanding application in the Keighley area. I commend the work of Aire Valley Against Incineration, which has campaigned hard on the issue. There is planning permission. It is quite unusual to apply for planning permission and not to apply at the same stage for an environmental permit. I do not know whether the Minister would have a comment to make on that. The application for an environmental permit bears little resemblance to the original planning application. Fifty per cent. more waste is envisaged. There is planning permission for 100,000 tonnes, and an extra 48,000 tonnes is now being added. The layout of the buildings and chimney stack has changed. The nature of the waste that might be burned has changed. The planning committee was told that only residual waste in the form of refuse-derived fuel would be included. Now the Environment Agency is being told that the facility will accept residual, commercial and industrial waste of a similar nature to unsorted municipal solid waste.

There is therefore great concern in the community. We hope that the Environment Agency will do a rigorous job. There is even more concern because of the nature

of the company involved—Endless Energy, which is not even a member of the trade association. It is based in the Isle of Man. It has two directors who have been named by the Environment Agency. One of them, Rajinder Singh Chatha, was the controlling force behind Oddbins, which has recently gone into administration. A tax tribunal recently found that he was

"intentionally misleading about some of the explicit lies that the tribunal has found were told to HMRC".

It decided that he was not a fit and proper person to be allowed to sell or distribute duty suspended alcohol. He is not a fit and proper person to sell alcohol! Despite the pleadings of my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) that this industry should be given a fair chance, these people are cowboys. Until recently cowboys were running Keighley Cougars, our proud rugby league team, but they have now gone. I will be writing to the chair of the Environment Agency to ask how it can possibly trust a man who the tax authorities say cannot be trusted.

Mr Sheerman: Will my hon. Friend give way? He did mention me.

John Grogan: I will not give way to my hon. Friend for a third time, but I look forward to having a cup of tea with the chair of the all-party group for Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire, and restoring our friendship. In the meantime, I hope the Front-Bench speakers will be robust about this. Obviously the Opposition Front-Bench speaker cannot speak on this occasion, but there is a chance that we could reach agreement on incinerators, perhaps even before we reach agreement on Europe across the House.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) on securing this important debate. It has clearly attracted a lot of attention from Members across the House.

The hon. Gentleman has particular concerns about the growth of incineration and the potential for overcapacity, and the negative impact that that might have on the drive for increased recycling. In the waste hierarchy, incineration is only above landfill, and we want to ensure that we reduce, reuse and recycle. Whether that involves promoting resource efficiency and moving towards a circular economy, the actions taken will allow us to extract maximum value from resources, and recover and regenerate products and materials at the end of their lifespan. We set that out clearly in our resources and waste strategy, which also set higher recycling ambitions. Those include delivering a 65% municipal waste recycling rate by 2035, and a minimum 70% recycling rate for packaging waste by 2030.

Hon. Members will know about the increase in recycling rates between 2001 and 2017-18, and local authority recycling has more than tripled, increasing from 12% to more than 42%. Over the same period, waste sent to landfill has gone from 79% to 12.5%. Policies aimed at diverting waste away from landfill have meant that the volume of waste being treated at energy-from-waste plants has increased, but that growth must not hinder

recycling ambitions. Even after delivering higher recycling levels, there will still be waste that we cannot recycle or reuse, either because it is contaminated or because there are no end markets for the material. Our overarching ambition is to manage that waste in a way that maximises its value as a resource, while minimising the environmental impact of its management.

We currently deal with such waste in three main ways: landfill, incineration with energy recovery, or export as refuse-derived fuel. Landfill is the least favoured option for waste. We have been clear in our strategy that we wish to reduce the level of municipal waste that is sent to landfill down to 10%—or less—by 2035.

Mr Sheerman: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I was about to answer the hon. Gentleman's point so I will not give way. He has already contributed twice to the debate.

Energy from waste or incineration with energy recovery should not compete with greater waste prevention, reuse or recycling. England currently has enough capacity to treat around 36% of residual municipal waste, and the projected increase in recycling thanks to our resources and waste strategy measures will reduce the future level of residual waste treatment infrastructure that is required. However, energy from waste will continue to have an important role in diverting waste from landfill—that is the point that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) tried to make clear.

Mr Sheerman: The Minister has just mentioned me. Will she give way on that point?

Dr Coffey: I will not. That is the best management option for most waste that cannot be reused or recycled, in terms of environmental impact and getting value from waste as a resource.

Energy-from-waste plants are regulated by the Environment Agency in England and must comply with the strict emission limits set by the industrial emissions directive. Every application for a new plant is assessed by the Environment Agency to ensure that it uses the best available techniques to minimise emissions, and that it will not have a significant effect on local air quality. The Environment Agency will not issue an environmental permit if the proposed plant will have a significant impact on the environment or harm human health. Once operational, energy-from-waste plants are closely regulated through a programme of regular inspections and audits carried out by the Environment Agency, which also carefully checks the results of the continuous air emissions monitoring that all plants must do.

Hon. Members should also note that Public Health England's position remains that modern, well-managed incinerators operated in accordance with an environmental permit are not a significant risk to public health. The Government have been clear that we want to maximise the resource value of waste, including residual waste. That is why we are working to drive greater efficiency of energy from waste plants by encouraging the use of the heat those plants produce.

Mr Sheerman: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I am trying to respond to the hon. Member for Keighley, who brought this 30-minute debate. I am conscious that other people have made points, but I will deal with his points first. He specifically referred to the Aire Valley incinerator; I am aware of what is being proposed, and I understand that City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council has granted Endless Energy, formerly known as the Aire Valley Energy from Waste facility, planning permission to develop such a facility for the recovery of energy from non-hazardous waste, to be built on the site of the former gasworks east of Keighley. The proposed facility will use standard incineration technology to generate electricity.

Endless Energy has also applied to the Environment Agency for an environmental permit, which it will need to operate its facility. The agency is carrying out a full technical assessment of Endless Energy's proposals to determine whether a permit can be issued. The Environment Agency has consulted the public as part of its determination and has received more than 2,000 responses. It also consults Public Health England and the local government director of public health on every energy from waste plant application that it receives, and takes their comments into account when deciding whether to issue a permit.

Mr Sheerman: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I am trying to respond to the questions that have been posed already—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. The Minister has made it clear she is not giving way.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, Mr Betts—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I hope it is a point of order, Mr Sheerman.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, I have never been in a Westminster Hall debate where a Minister has refused to give way, even when she has mentioned the person who wants to intervene. I have never known a Minister fail to give way and just read her speech and ignore the fact that this is a debating Chamber.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know that that is not a point of order.

Dr Coffey: As I say, I am trying to answer the points made by the hon. Member for Keighley, whose debate this is. He referred to a planning application, but he will be aware that it will not be a matter for the national Government in this instance to determine whether the changes to the planning application are appropriate. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) have a planning application that is under way as a nationally significant infrastructure project, I believe. They will be aware that again, I cannot comment specifically in that regard.

However, it is important that we recognise that one of the things we are doing in the resources and waste strategy is effectively removing this condition, which I believe is where the hon. Member for Keighley has a problem, of TEEP—technically, environmentally

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

and economically practicable—exemptions, which allow exemptions based on technical, economic and environmental differences. Under the proposals that we have put out in the consultation, which we hope to include in the Environment Bill in the next Session of Parliament, there is a specific removal of that TEEP exemption on what councils will be required to collect for recycling. It will determine not how they collect it but what they collect.

Therefore, that situation will no longer arise; if the responses to the consultation agree with what the Government believe is the right policy to take forward, councils will no longer have the ability to simply say, “It is not economically viable for us to do this anymore.” That is quite a revolution in the resource and waste strategy.

Returning to the point about the Environment Agency’s being more robust, there are some challenges relating to how the EA can implement the TEEP exemptions with councils in its considerations. That is an important part of why we are pushing forward that proposal in our consultations, which I hope will be in the future Bill.

Mr Sheerman *rose*—

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. We need a bit of order in this debate. The Minister has made it absolutely clear that she is not giving way to the hon. Members. Can we please get on with the debate? She has made that absolutely clear.

Dr Coffey: I am very conscious of the quality of people being considered. That is another reason why we are starting to make changes, which I hope the Environment Bill will strengthen, that will allow the Environment Agency to assess the different offences that people may have committed. At the moment, it is restricted specifically to issues surrounding waste. We are broadening that out.

I do not know how that would apply to the issue to which the hon. Member for Keighley referred about somebody not being licensed to sell alcohol. I do not know what that would mean with regard to offences, and whether such a condition would be introduced. I assure him that the industry is fed up of cowboys taking this on, but it is important that the district council and the Environment Agency have different roles in the assessment of energy-from-waste plants—one is about the planning, the other is about the environmental impact and keeping in line with the industrial emissions directive.

Mr Sheerman *rose*—

Dr Coffey: The hon. Member for Keighley has suggested an incineration tax previously. As he pointed out, tax policy is generally a matter for the Treasury. Although energy from waste can play an important role in reducing the amount of waste going to landfill, in the long term we want to maximise the amount of waste used for recycling. Again, wider policies are set out in our resources

and waste strategy. Changes that we will introduce to the extent of producer responsibility will effectively incentivise the design of products that are much more straightforward to recycle.

That is an opportunity, but I am also aware that industry and the Environmental Services Association are concerned that, if we do not reach 65% in that time or do not make progress more quickly, there will be a lack of incineration. In effect, that will be a commercial decision for them to consider, but, as was mentioned earlier, we want to encourage the use of the heat that plants produce, and to work closely with industry to secure a substantial increase in the number of energy from waste plants that are formally recognised as achieving recovery status R1. We will ensure that all future EfW plants achieve recovery status.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) rightly talked about transparent information for residents. I am conscious that some environmental assessments are very technical. That is why we have the Environment Agency to make that judgment. However, there is still an opportunity for residents to table questions either directly to the developer or to the Environment Agency during its consideration.

Priti Patel: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I am just trying to get through all the different points. My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) rightly talked about the local community, but he should be aware that most such plants are dealt with through local planning. They tend to be in the local plan, so it is important that we challenge those different elements during the consideration.

I am conscious that two people want to intervene. I invite the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) to do so first.

Mrs Hodgson: That is really kind of the Minister. May I apologise for my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on behalf of us all?

Dr Coffey: I was just about to invite him to intervene.

Mrs Hodgson: He has gone, thankfully. The Minister will be aware that there has been an application for a gasification plant in my constituency. The key bone of contention is that no decision was made on what form of technology would be used before the application was put in. Does she agree that in order for people to campaign and scrutinise such applications properly, those making them should say up front what form of technology they will use?

Dr Coffey: That is an important consideration. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) mentioned pyrolysis or gasification. Different technologies will have different environmental impacts. There is starting to be a trend towards that, possibly because it is then easier to generate heat. However, I am not an expert in the individual technologies. It is worthy of consideration, but the hon. Lady’s constituents should be assured by the industrial emissions directive-tough regulations that are already in place, and will be carried over in the event of an EU exit.

I was going to invite the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) to intervene, but I had not realised that he had walked out of the debate. I am sure that he will write to me anyway. I will finish by saying that it really matters that we transition to better designed products, and make more of recycling, reducing and re-using the waste that we generate. The Government are introducing very strong parts of our resources and waste strategy, and I am confident that that will lead to better environmental outcomes. I want councils to use every lever possible, including the ACE UK recycling site in Halifax, which has offered, through Costa Coffee, to do a lot more recycling of coffee cups; it is the only place that recycles Tetra Paks. Overall, I believe that we are making good progress.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for two reasons, Mr Hanson. First, I have not served under your chairmanship before and secondly, as I will allude to later on, you and I have shared some of the memories of this terrible event.

It is worth remembering what happened 100 years ago—in fact, it began 100 years ago today. Amritsar is a holy city that is immensely crammed, as it was 100 years ago. It is a place where people live on top of one another. Thousands had gathered at the Bagh in the days before 13 April 1919. British Army officers greatly feared an uprising in or around May, which is when the Army changed its positions for the summer months in India.

On 10 April, a protest took place at the home of the deputy commissioner of Amritsar, calling for the release of two independence movement leaders. The protests spilled over, protestors were shot and some were killed. Bear in mind that this is three days before the massacre itself. That sparked rioting, during which British banks and people were targeted and British lives were lost. On 11 April, a British schoolteacher, Marcella Sherwood, was attacked and left for dead when cycling home. She was saved by local Indian men who recognised her from the school.

Between 11 and 13 April, civil disobedience and protest rang out across the Punjab. By 13 April, the Army had implemented martial law, and the measures included the prohibition of mass assembly. Any gathering of more than four people could be dispersed by the military. On 13 April, 100 years ago, approximately 15,000 people were gathered in the square. It was a common meeting place for people of all religions. They were not just people of the Sikh faith; there were Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs, present to celebrate and coincide with the Sikh new year festival of Baisakhi. They were gathered in the square. The crowd was peaceful and unarmed. The location, date and time had been set the day before so citizens could register discontent with the political situation, but on a peaceful basis.

On the morning of the massacre, General Dyer had paraded his troops, flexing his power and authority. With martial law on its side, the Army knew it could break up any large groups. However, the scale of the gathering exceeded the Army's expectation and it was outnumbered by an astonishing margin. The square where the gathering took place is approximately 200 yards by 200 yards. It is surrounded by high walls and has a deep pit in the space. Those present were hemmed in with no shelter and no means of escape.

On the day, the reports say that the massacre took place with 50 Sikhs and Gurkhas under General Dyer's command. They shot 33 rounds each—a total of 1,650 rounds. The official estimate was that 379 people had been killed and more than 1,000 injured. The reality was that the crowd was so dense that one bullet would kill three, four or even five people as it passed

[Bob Blackman]

through them. The death toll is therefore believed to be far higher, with more than 1,000 people killed and many thousands injured.

I am sure colleagues will want to relay stories about the massacre. I will talk also about my personal experience, having been to the site. We have to remember this was 100 years ago, when there was no 24/7 news coverage and no mobile phones to take pictures of what had happened and the atrocity that had occurred. It took the British Government until October 1919 to open an inquiry under the direction of the then Home Secretary, Edwin Montagu, led by Lord William Hunter. The inquiry became known as the Hunter Commission, after the Government of India had originally called it the disorders inquiry—talk about an inapt name. The inquiry called witnesses from across the region, which spanned what is now Pakistan, as well as India. At the time, and importantly, those questioned were not put under oath when giving their evidence. In November, after the key eye witness accounts had been taken, General Dyer himself was called to give evidence. For reasons unknown to us—or to anyone—he refused legal counsel or advocacy and represented himself. Almost immediately, he made trouble for himself. Reports of the inquiry suggest that:

“Again and again, Dyer convicts himself out of his own mouth. As his friend Major General Nigel Woodyatt later told him, ‘he was bound to get the worst of it; not so much for what he had done, but for what he had said.’”

That is a particular view.

The report published by the commission found, in summary, that notice to disperse was not issued to the crowd at all, which should have been done by the Army, under its normal terms of engagement, and that Dyer had exceeded his authority—note that he was, temporarily, a brigadier, was really not qualified and had had his own uniform made in his own guise. It also deemed that the time for which the shooting went on, for 1,650 rounds, was an error, although I think that “an absolute atrocity” would be an accurate perspective. The inquiry found no evidence that supported the Army’s theory that a conspiracy was in motion to overthrow British rule in the Punjab.

There have been various different visits to the region since. Her Majesty the Queen visited in 1961, 1983 and 1997. Up until 1997 she made no comment, but in that visit she said in her speech:

“It is no secret that there have been some difficult episodes in our past—Jallianwala Bagh, which I shall visit tomorrow, is a distressing example. But history cannot be rewritten, however much we might sometimes wish otherwise. It has its moments of sadness, as well as gladness. We must learn from the sadness and build on the gladness.”

I think that if Her Majesty the Queen had made that speech later, she would have used different words.

Asquith, leader of the Liberals and a former Prime Minister, said it was

“one of the worst outrages in the whole of our history”,

and I agree with him. Winston Churchill, who was Secretary of State for Air at the time, said:

“The crowd was unarmed, except with bludgeons. It was not attacking anybody or anything. It was holding a seditious meeting. When fire had been opened upon it to disperse it, it tried to run away. Pinned up in a narrow place considerably smaller than Trafalgar Square, with hardly any exits, and packed together so that one bullet would drive through three or four bodies, the people ran madly this way and the other. When the fire was

directed upon the centre, they ran to the sides. The fire was then directed upon the sides. Many threw themselves down on the ground, and the fire was then directed on the ground. This was continued for 8 or 10 minutes, and it stopped only when the ammunition had reached the point of exhaustion.”—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1920; Vol. 131, c. 1729.]

If they had had more ammunition, they would probably have carried on shooting.

General Dyer commented—though I cannot give the date—that,

“I did not know the city very well. It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd; but one of producing a sufficient moral effect, from a military point of view, not only on those who were present but more especially throughout the Punjab...I think it quite possible that I could have dispersed the crowd without firing, but they would have come back again and laughed.”

That he shot people in such a fashion condemns him out of his own mouth.

He then apparently commented to women at the consulate that evening:

“I’m for the high jump but I saved you women and children.”

No one was under threat. It was a peaceful religious gathering, and we should hang our heads in shame at what was done in the name of Britain.

General Dyer went on to receive a hero’s funeral. He gave the order to shoot, and in my judgment, having read about this topic, he was unfit to hold the position he held. He showed no remorse at any stage for the deaths he had caused, or the damage he had done to the Indian people and to India-UK relations. He remarked to his underlings at the height of the firing:

“Do you think they’ve had enough? No, we’ll give them four rounds more.”

That was outrageous. In spite of that, General Dyer was vigorously defended by—I say this with shame—the Conservative party, as well as most of the military establishment. He evaded any penalties post inquiry, as his military superiors advised that they could find no fault with his actions, his orders, or his conduct otherwise. However, during debate in the Commons, Asquith made his appropriate comments.

At the time of the massacre, O’Dwyer was the lieutenant general of Punjab, and it was understood that General Dyer was his man in the military. Dyer did his bidding and followed his orders closely. A theory has been repeatedly floated that O’Dwyer approved the order to open fire, and was the chief architect of the plan. O’Dwyer, like many of his ilk, was paranoid about a plot to overthrow British rule in the region. The regional British rulers were convinced that the increasingly popular independence movement would involve violence against Brits on a large scale, and would lead to humiliation for the empire—note that the commission found that suspicion without merit and completely untrue.

In March 1940, O’Dwyer was shot by Udham Singh outside a Westminster venue. Singh had been at Amritsar that fateful day, and the story goes that he himself had been shot and wounded. That led to a life of activism that resulted in him fatally shooting the man who, alongside Dyer, many in the Raj held responsible for the massacre. Udham Singh was hanged for taking his revenge.

You and I visited the site of the massacre in August 2016, Mr Hanson, and prior to seeing it at first hand, I expressed ignorance about what had happened there.

Nothing can prepare people for seeing the site and imagining what it must have been like for the 15,000 people trapped within that arena—literally in a shooting gallery—by the soldiers who were present. The atmosphere must have been incredible; it must have been horrendous for the people who suffered that massacre. Remember, not only were they shot: some threw themselves down the well to try to escape the bullets, and many were crushed to death while trying to get down that well and out of the troops' firing line.

Mr Hanson, we saw at first hand the museum that is being created on the site of the massacre, and the fact that India will never forget. We owe it to the victims and their families to never forget what happened in our name. I hope that there will be an apology from the British Government, not just an acceptance of a terrible crime. When the Minister replies, I look forward to him not explaining away what happened, but apologising for our involvement and for what was done in our name. That would be a start; it would clear the air. Equally, I hope that Ministers will go to commemorative events in India: one is to be held later this month, but I particularly hope that Ministers will attend in July, when I understand the museum will be formally opened.

Those who follow these things will know that I have asked for an apology before. I signed two early-day motions—413 in October 2017 and 1868 in November 2018—and last night I tabled another one, 2281, calling on the British Government to apologise and to attend the commemorative events. I encourage colleagues from across the House to sign that early-day motion to demonstrate our cross-party support.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I certainly support the hon. Gentleman in asking the British Government to apologise, because what he has described—we have all read about it in the history books—is horrendous. Although he mentioned that 1,000 people could have been killed, the Indian Government say the figure is much higher, so the figure is disputed, although I do not contradict what he has said. I certainly support him, and many people in my constituency feel very strongly about it. Also, the area was known as the Indian subcontinent then and people from Bangladesh and Pakistan could equally identify with the massacre. Does he agree with me that they too should be involved in any apology?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is right to say that the number of deaths is disputed. The Indian Government estimate more than 1,000 and the official report at the time stated 379. Because of the absolute disaster on the day, the figures are disputed and we do not have further records. People had gathered from across the Indian subcontinent for the Baisakhi. They came from what we now know as Pakistan and Bangladesh and from India itself, so other countries were involved, as well as citizens and families of other countries. Clearly, they should be remembered, and other Governments will no doubt have a view.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I simply want to add my endorsement. I have a significant Sikh population in my constituency—more than 3,000 people—and I was delighted to attend a Baisakhi event at the weekend

to parade with them. The topic often comes up when I visit the gurdwara, so I want to endorse the comments made by my hon. Friend and I wish him well in his pursuit of the apology.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. This weekend gurdwaras across the UK and across the world will remember the massacre with sadness and anger, and we should recognise that.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Should it not be reinforced to the Minister and the Foreign Office that the 100th anniversary is the most pertinent time to make an apology? With Baisakhi festivals taking place all over the country in the next couple of weeks, it would be good if the Minister were able to give good news to those gatherings today.

Bob Blackman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The centenary of such an event is the right time to apologise and own up to what happened, as opposed to simply acknowledging the dreadful event and atrocity that took place. The British Government at the time accepted responsibility, but did not issue an apology, and one should be issued, particularly at this time. Although a mixture of people of different faiths were massacred, it was predominantly people of the Sikh religion who suffered.

I classify myself as a firm friend of India. I am a devout patriot of this country, but it makes me sad and ashamed that the massacre was perpetrated in our name. It is time to own up to it and make an apology and time to make suitable reparations for the damage it caused not only to people present and their families, but to the relationship between India and the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

David Hanson (in the Chair): I have eight hon. and right hon. Members who wish to speak. The Front-Bench speakers have to be called at 3.30 pm, so we have 40 minutes, which allows four to five minutes maximum per Member.

2.50 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this important debate and I declare my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British Sikhs. As we approach the 100th anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar on 13 April 1919, it is clear that there needs to be a formal apology from the United Kingdom Government that accepts and acknowledges their part in the massacre. We heard from the hon. Gentleman about the events that transpired. I will not go into much further detail. Instead, I will focus on what should happen now and how we can seek to ensure that such a tragedy helps us to better understand our history and shape our future.

The outrage and the shocking nature of the attack, even 100 years ago, can be seen in comments and condemnation of the massacre, including from former Prime Minister Asquith, who called it “one of the worst outrages in the whole of our history”.

[Preet Kaur Gill]

Churchill called it

“an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation.”

Under the command of Colonel Reginald Dyer, the British Indian Army fired rifles into a crowd of people, who were predominantly Sikhs but also Hindus and Muslims, gathered in Jallianwala Bagh to celebrate Vaisakhi. When the firing finally ended, the public place had turned into a garden of the dead. Even children, some as young as three, were not spared.

It is not enough to condemn the incident and express shame. The UK Government must show respect to the worldwide Sikh community and have the courage to make a full apology for the deeply shameful massacre of innocent, unarmed civilians in Amritsar 100 years ago.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the work she does as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British Sikhs. I join her and others in calling for an outright apology. It is frankly shocking that we have not had that, after a number of calls for it in Parliament. Does she agree that we need a further apology for the findings of the Hunter commission, which concluded that General Dyer committed a “grave error”? It was not a grave error; it was a massacre of innocent men, women and children, and we need an apology.

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. I say gently to hon. Members that interventions must be short. A significant number of Members wish to contribute to the debate, so there are only four to five minutes each. The longer Members speak in interventions, the shorter that time will be.

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend raises a good point about the Hunter commission, which I am sure the Minister heard.

Regrettably, the massacre came within months of the end of the great war, in which tens of thousands of turban-wearing Sikhs from Punjab had sacrificed their lives for our freedom in Europe. The formal apology should include the victims of the massacre, their families and descendants, the people of Punjab and, given the location, timing and identity of the massacre, the worldwide Sikh community. That is the least that the UK Government can do on the 100th anniversary of the Amritsar massacre. Will they take this opportunity finally to do the right thing?

That is not enough. The apology should mark the start of learning of teaching our children about the massacre in history lessons in our schools and learning about the context of the British empire, which through imperialism and colonialism had exploited and subjugated people around the world. According to polling in 2017, 44% of people were proud of Britain’s history of colonialism, and YouGov polling in 2014 showed that nearly half believed that countries were better off for having been colonised. The Amritsar massacre was not the only brutal act carried out, and we need to teach our children about it, the shared history that it creates and the backdrop of what the Commonwealth is and means. In that, children will learn where they came from and why they are where they are today.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Preet Kaur Gill: I will not take any more interventions as I am conscious of time; my apologies.

By othering or writing certain people out of British history—casting them simply as pawns or as a means to an end rather than individuals with their own histories—can we really be surprised that hate crime continues to exist or that racism continues to fester? The question therefore remains whether an apology without a genuine understanding of the past can ever provide the closure that so many Sikhs need.

2.54 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). Her speech touched many chords that echo with us all.

I was going to speak about the history of the massacre, but that has been very well covered by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and I was going to speak about some of the cries for justice, but that has been very well covered by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston, so I will cover what I think the massacre says to us today.

It is important to remember that this massacre, this crime—because that is what it was—does not just speak to the past. It speaks to the future; it speaks to us as people in this House, in this country, in this world, because it reminds us that the responsibilities that we hold today have consequences going forward for generations. It reminds us of the significance of the decisions that we take today—whether, like the House of Lords 100 years ago, to celebrate a man so guilty of an extraordinary crime or, like the House of Commons then, to condemn him. Those decisions will echo on the children and grandchildren of those people. It reminds us also that the divisions that we once saw—British soldiers on one side and Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus on the other—are not as stark today as they once were.

For me, that is the message of hope in this. In all great tragedies—this is undoubtedly one of the greatest—there is a message of hope, and the message of hope here is that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston and I, whose peoples have been victims of different massacres in different parts of the world over the last century, are sitting here as equals, representing communities that are equal, in a country that really does understand what it is to come together, to bring together communities of many distinctions, many differences, many creeds and colours.

That is why I think the moment for honesty is here. I thought the hon. Lady spoke beautifully when she said this. The moment for honesty is here, because an apology is not the undoing of an act that ended 100 years ago with the deaths of almost 1,000 people. An apology cannot bring them back to life; it cannot right that wrong. But what it can do is turn a page and say to a generation of Indians today and to a generation of British people today: “Neither of us are those people any more. Neither of us were there on that terrible day in Jallianwala Bagh. But we both recognise that the shared history that binds us, the shared history that brought us together at that point in time a century ago,

unites us today.” An apology would allow us to move forward, to look to the future and to build the future that the people of the UK, the people of India and people around the world really want to see.

2.58 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this timely and important debate.

The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh stands out as one of the most appalling and significant episodes in colonial history, not only because of the brutality of what happened there, but because of the context and its huge and long-lasting effect. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said, the context is that it was just after the first world war, when Indian soldiers had made huge sacrifices in fighting side by side with British soldiers. Many of those Indian soldiers came from the Punjab, which has a long and proud military history. However, when they went home, they were not treated as heroes, but found themselves subject to harsh colonial laws such as the Rowlatt Acts, which were passed in March 1919 and deprived people of their liberty—they sanctioned indefinite detention and incarceration without trial. All of that is the backdrop to the protests that were happening in the Punjab at the time.

The hon. Member for Harrow East read out the horrific details, and I will not dwell on them, because we now know them: a peaceful crowd of thousands; the attempt to bring in an armoured car that was foiled only by the narrowness of the alleyway on the approach to the Bagh; the lack of any warning or any attempt to disperse the crowd by peaceful means; 50 soldiers, armed with Lee-Enfield rifles; 10 minutes of firing; 1,650 rounds fired; people vainly jumping into the well to try to escape the bullets. Official estimates were that 379 people were killed and three times that many injured, but other estimates suggest many, many more of both.

The rounds fired were indiscriminate—Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus were all among the dead. We know of Churchill’s verdict that it was a “monstrous event”. Those horrific details ensure that it is remembered 100 years later. Many see Jallianwala Bagh as the moment when the movement for Indian independence became unstoppable—the moment when many people in India gave up any hope for colonial rule—and perhaps even as the beginning of the end of the empire itself. The episode was not only outstanding in its brutality; it achieved the very opposite of the intention of General Dyer.

Let us turn to the question of an apology. When Prime Minister David Cameron visited the site in 2013, he described this as a

“deeply shameful event in British history”,

but stopped short of an apology. Now, as we approach the 100th anniversary, there are growing calls for an apology, as we have heard in this debate. I add my voice to those calls. I am currently co-ordinating a cross-party letter calling for an apology, which has been signed by the hon. Member for Harrow East, the hon. Member

for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee, and many of my hon. Friends.

Some people ask why we should apologise for one atrocity, when there have been many more in history. “Why should we judge the past by the standards of today?” The crucial point is that this massacre was not judged by the standards of today; it was widely condemned at the time by Churchill, Asquith and Josiah Wedgwood. In response to what happened, the first Asian Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, returned his knighthood in disgust. The exceptional horror was there for all to see in 1919 and 1920, and not just today. In any case, what kind of argument says that, as we cannot do everything, we should do nothing? This demands far more than a cycle of whataboutery in an attempt to change the subject. It was a particularly heinous and appalling act, and had enormous historical as well as human significance. A lack of an apology has continued to be a thorn in the side of the relationship between the UK and India, even though great progress has been made—today we are friendly and cordial diplomatic powers with good relations.

The Jallianwala Bagh atrocity still lives on in memory. As we approach the 100th anniversary this weekend, the time is right for an official apology. It should not take 100 years to say sorry for such a terrible crime, but saying sorry 100 years on is better than not saying sorry at all. I hope that the Minister will heed the calls made in this debate—on a cross-party basis—for an apology. If he cannot personally issue the apology today, I hope the Prime Minister makes one soon on behalf of the Government and the country, 100 years on from this terrible crime.

3.4 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this afternoon’s debate. He set out the background very well. It is clear from the *Hansard* transcripts of the time that there was uncertainty about the events as they happened, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. As the truth emerged, some of the things that people had said at the time did not reflect what had actually happened on the ground.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre is a particularly awful event to read about, because it was a methodical and disturbing mass murder of innocent people who were peacefully protesting in a public square. Many of them had come on their way back from worship at the Golden Temple, and there were also children there. The exits were blocked and unarmed people were shot at over and over, as we heard, until the ammunition was all but exhausted.

The incident changed the course of history, but as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said, it certainly was not an isolated crime by the British empire. The massacre came in the context of the repressive Rowlatt Act 1919, which permitted political cases in India to be tried without juries and included internment of suspects without trial. That in turn led to protests and an escalation of violence, to martial law and the forbidding of gatherings. The massacre was followed by other events, such as public floggings and

[Alison Thewliss]

forcing people to crawl in the streets just to humiliate them. Mahatma Gandhi said that he had no doubt that “the shooting was ‘frightful’, the loss of innocent life deplorable. But the slow torture, degradation and emasculation that followed was much worse, more calculated, malicious and soul-killing, and the actors who performed the deeds deserve greater condemnation than General Dyer for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The latter merely destroyed a few bodies but the others tried to kill the soul of a nation.”

India is a country that has contributed greatly to the world in culture and faith, despite enduring such horrific events in its formation. The Indian diaspora, of all faiths and none, who I have known in my constituency show compassion and kindness to others. The Scottish Sikhs who I marched alongside in Saturday’s Vaisakhi celebrations have made a huge impact on their community, providing free meals, running soup kitchens and providing education services for people both at home and abroad. They stand up for human rights abuses and show solidarity for persecuted people around the world. They have invested time, energy and money in Scotland—they are Scottish. They are building in Glasgow two purpose-built and beautiful gurdwaras. We owe it to them to ensure that their legacy is acknowledged and this is not just swept under the carpet.

Of course, it was not just Sikhs who were killed that day; there were Hindus and Muslims, as we have heard, and a peaceful gathering of a cross-section of India’s peoples, who were indiscriminately murdered. A poster featured in a book about the atrocity by London historians Amandeep Singh Madra and Parmjit Singh reads:

“Those who sacrificed their lives for their country, live forever. Brutality crossed all limits at Jallianwala Bagh, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh—everyone cried in grief.”

The Minister knows, as we all do, that there is no justification for what happened. Even 100 years on, that flame of injustice still burns brightly in people’s minds.

Burns said:

“O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!”

At this particular time in history, with the UK leaving the EU, amid the radicalisation of right-wing extremists and the pompous rhetoric about the rebuilding of the British empire, we need a meaningful acknowledgement of the horrific legacy that that empire left behind. It must be for schools everywhere to learn of that legacy, not just for gurdwaras to teach it when people choose to come and visit. Everybody should learn in school of how the peoples of the empire were treated.

Martyn Day: I find myself in full agreement with everything that has been said today, and I echo the calls for a formal apology. It has been said that if we do not learn from history, we are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past. We cannot allow those mistakes to ever be repeated, so we need a clear and unequivocal apology from the Government on behalf of us all.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. As elected Members of this Parliament, if we allow notions of empire to go unchecked and unchallenged, we fail to acknowledge the pain of that past—the pain for countries all around the world, but particularly in this case for the people of India. It is beyond time for

Her Majesty’s Government to apologise and take responsibility for one of the worst crimes of colonialism. An apology for those events is a very good place to start.

Opportunities for apologies or acknowledgements of the events at Jallianwala Bagh have been missed in recent times. As hon. Members have said, David Cameron visited the site and described the incident as “deeply shameful”, but did not use that ample opportunity to make a formal apology. A visit from Her Majesty and Prince Philip in the 1990s managed to create even more ill-feeling, when Prince Philip said that the Indian Government’s figure for the death toll at the site was over-exaggerated. William and Kate chose not to visit the site on their official tour of India. Those are all opportunities missed, adding to that sense of pain.

It is well beyond time to stop side-stepping the issue and to show some humility and regret for the horrors of the past. I ask the Minister to go back to the Foreign Secretary and encourage him to take the steps that successive Governments have not been brave enough to take.

3.9 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson.

One hundred years ago, the lives of 1,000 men and women were ended and the destiny of millions was changed. I thank my dear friend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his work and congratulate him on securing the debate. It has been an opportunity for him and everyone here to discuss and commemorate a historically distant, yet important and emotive subject, and I thank him for his emotional contribution to the debate.

The murders at Jallianwala Bagh are almost unknown in Britain outside the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, but to this day they shape the relationship between those countries and the UK. For millions of people across my home state of Punjab, the event is their defining cultural memory of British rule. The massacre finally crystallised in the minds of the intellectual and wealthy middle classes of British India what millions of working-class people already knew: ultimately, imperial rule was neither enlightened nor benevolent, but rather it was brutalising, dehumanising, and murderous. It set in motion the forces that ultimately secured independence.

At the time, the actions of General Dyer were roundly decried by many Members of the House, and the Labour party unanimously passed motions at a national conference, denouncing the killings. As the hon. Member for Harrow East said, there was no majority for support for Dyer in this country, yet a Conservative newspaper, which later merged with *The Daily Telegraph*, raised funds for General Dyer and collected for him the modern equivalent of £1 million—perhaps that was the origin of the hostile environment.

What was not forthcoming was a formal apology from the Government for what had happened, for the lives taken away, or for the injuries to thousands more. I hope that there is agreement today—including among those Members who have been unable to contribute to this debate—that although a formal apology would not undo the hurt and pain, it would send a signal. I do not believe, however, that an apology would be the be-all

and end-all of the matter. I wrote to the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, demanding an apology, and in 2007 I tabled an early-day motion that was supported by Members from all major political parties and called not just for an apology but for education and commemoration. Last March I asked the Prime Minister whether she would lend her weight to the campaign for remembrance of that brutal day, and I thank the Minister for the communication between us on that subject.

I want children across the country to benefit from learning about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and to learn not just about 1,000 years of British success and innovation, but also about the human cost across the world of expedition, exploration and exploitation. This is not just an act of flagellation; it will help British people to understand better our own place in the world, and not to repeat the mistakes of the past. It means that we will know our own history, and how we are seen by people in other cultures and countries. We should also take steps to remember those who were killed, not just through those actions, but by actions that were repeated around the world and perpetrated on communities large and small. Acts of barbarity and cruelty pepper the history of the British empire. Such acts must be remembered, and a monument in central London—the heart and capital of the empire—would be a fitting tribute.

The speeches made today have been emotive. Such emotion runs through the communities of all the countries of British India, and even today the views of millions of people about the United Kingdom are derived from that. Members of the Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian communities are meeting this week, in halls, religious places and civic buildings, to commemorate and remember those family members and their friends who lost their lives on 13 April 1919.

I thank the Jallianwala Bagh centenary commemoration committee and the Shaheed Udham Singh Welfare Trust in Birmingham for leading the campaign in this country and supporting us all. I hope that this place will do them and those who were affected 100 years ago the honour of respecting their loss, and that the Prime Minister will officially apologise for what happened and take action to ensure that we do not fall into old behaviours.

3.15 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I, like so many others, take this opportunity to thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate and for expressing so eloquently the horror of that day; what it must have been like; and how he appreciated that horror for the first time. That is something that we should all take away from the debate.

I will move on to why, 100 years on, I feel that it is almost inconceivable that we are still discussing whether we should apologise for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. In this place, we so often pride ourselves on calling for action by others—other countries and Governments—to end injustice. In the last week, we have railed against injustice in Brunei; we have talked at length about injustice all over the world; and we have pondered the 25th anniversary of the horrors of Rwanda. Yet here we are, 100 years later, with this crime and horror on our national conscience, debating whether to apologise.

For me, there is no question; there is no other action but to apologise. It is important that we do so for many reasons. The horror of the massacre, the injustice of it and the mistakes that were made at the time must be acknowledged or we will—as hon. Friends have said—be condemned to repeat them. It is time that we expressed the respect that we feel for our Sikh communities throughout the country, in my Edinburgh West constituency and beyond, and for what their community has suffered at the hands of the British empire. It is important that our constituents feel that respect and know that we do not just acknowledge the massacre, but apologise for what was done 100 years ago.

As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said, it is also important that we do not just apologise and walk away, but that we see that as a beginning to highlighting that moment and using it to educate our own children about a past that was not as perfect as is often portrayed in our schools. It was not as wonderful to be part of the British empire as we often claim. We must acknowledge that, although we should not be trapped in the past as some say, we need to recognise the crimes that were committed and the people who were affected. Although we can never change that, we can at least go some way to alleviating the pain that is felt, simply by saying two words that sometimes seem so difficult: “We’re sorry.”

3.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate. I very much look forward to the Minister’s response and I thank him for his tireless efforts on behalf of our great country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This morning, I signed the latest early-day motion tabled by the hon. Member for Harrow East, as well as his previous early-day motions, and I will be on the record tomorrow morning as having supported him the whole way through.

Yesterday, there was a story in the provincial press about the massacre and, unfortunately, about the role played by some with Irish ancestry who were in the Army at the time. I am very privileged to represent Strangford and Northern Ireland. Other hon. Members have referred to communities coming together. In Northern Ireland, our two traditions have two different histories, but if we dwell too much on the history that divides us rather than the reasons for being together, we would find ourselves unable to move forward. I am very pleased that we have managed to do that.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I apologise for not being present at the beginning of the debate. Those of us who have visited Jallianwala Bagh have seen the well where people scrambled for their lives, and the bullet holes still in the walls, and realise that just around the corner from that place, where some of the worst that humanity can do happened, is some of the best that humanity can do, at the Golden Temple. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as Rabindranath Tagore said, that was the end of the British legitimacy in India? The end of the raj was April 1919. I should like, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) suggested, a physical memorial, but should schools not

[Stephen Pound]

teach about it far more? Jallianwala Bagh was not just a crime against humanity. It was the end of British India.

Jim Shannon: I agree. As has been said, it was clearly the turning point for the empire. As others have mentioned, on Sunday 13 April 1919 the British military opened fire on thousands of unarmed civilians in Jallianwala Bagh, leaving somewhere between 379 and 1,000 people dead, and perhaps as many as 1,500 wounded. That terrible tragedy represents an extremely dark chapter in British history, which stands in stark opposition to the modern-day British values that we hold so dear, and particularly the respect for human rights that I have spoken about often in the House and in Westminster Hall. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on international freedom of religion or belief, and on the Pakistani minorities. I have a deep interest in the issue.

What started as a celebration turned into a scene of carnage—a graveyard and the murder of innocents. On that fateful day in the Punjab, the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and religion or belief, to name but a few, were violated in one of the most violent ways imaginable. Peaceful protestors, Sikh celebrants of the major religious festival of Baisakhi, and indeed many Muslims, were cut down that day for exercising their human rights as they should. We are rightly proud of the stance that the United Kingdom has taken in support of human rights across the world, including work to advance freedom of religion or belief. If the British Government are to continue to stand up for those rights, as I believe they will, and to be taken seriously, we must call out violations wherever they happen and whoever carried them out, even if that means looking at our past and perhaps recognising our errors.

It is not a sign of weakness to acknowledge mistakes—even one as egregious as the one we are discussing. In fact, it is much easier to live in denial or to blame mistakes on something or someone else. What is difficult and truly requires courage is to stand up in front of the world and say that the UK is fully committed to human rights and that we therefore fully accept we should act, in relation to the violation of the rights of those killed in Jallianwala Bagh 100 years ago.

Failure to issue a formal apology is harmful to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, because the value of recognising a mistake and owning up to it is not a matter of self-flagellation or wallowing in the error—it is to ensure that such mistakes are never made again and to create room for stronger relations built on the basis of shared humanity. If we bury our heads in the sand and refuse to take responsibility we will be refusing fully to learn the lessons of the past and develop stronger bonds, and putting an asterisk beside any statement about the UK's commitment to human rights. However, if we face up to our past, accept our role and teach our children, as the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said, not only about our glories but about our mistakes, we will create a stronger, more compassionate nation and a stronger, more compassionate world.

A true test of the morality of the action is to ask what we would want if the situation were reversed. I dare say that if the shoe were on the other foot, everyone in this

Chamber and indeed everyone in this great country would demand that the Indian Government take responsibility. I believe that commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and apologising for our role in it gives us an enormous, powerful opportunity to announce to the world that that terrible event does not represent modern British values, and that Britain will stand up for the rights of anyone, anywhere, be they Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, or of any other religion, belief, nationality or race. I sincerely hope that the Government will seize the opportunity with both hands and I look to the Minister for that much needed apology.

3.24 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this timely debate. As we approach the centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre I also thank my parliamentary neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), for organising a letter to the Government asking them to issue an apology. That letter and today's debate demonstrate the strength of cross-party concern and support for such an apology.

The horrific events of 13 April 100 years ago in Amritsar, when thousands of innocent people were killed or injured on the orders of a British officer and at the hands of British soldiers, are a source of deep pain among the British Indian community, particularly the Sikh community. I know the strength of feeling among my own constituents in Wolverhampton about the atrocity.

On that April afternoon in 1919, people came to the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, the Sikh holy city—home of the Golden Temple, the holiest site for Sikhs—for a peaceful gathering during Baisakhi, the most significant Sikh religious festival. The crowd was unarmed. They were in an enclosed space, a walled garden, with only a few entrances. Thousands of people were crammed into a space that Churchill later described as “considerably smaller than Trafalgar Square”.—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1920; Vol. 131, c. 1729.]

Therefore, when the firing began they were trapped; there was nowhere for them to escape to. Many of those present were women and children.

The gathering presented no threat to British troops. It was a peaceful gathering. As many hon. Members have mentioned, no warnings were issued, and there was no order for people to disperse. Instead, the British commander had the exits blocked and ordered his soldiers to fire into the crowd. As the hon. Member for Harrow East so eloquently described, the firing did not stop until the soldiers ran out of ammunition, and the bullet holes in the walls are visible to this day.

The official inquiry concluded that 379 people were killed that day, with many more injured, but many sources dispute those figures and claim that the death toll was much, much higher. It is important to remember that that massacre came after hundreds of thousands of Indians had fought alongside British troops in the first world war. At the time of the massacre, Winston Churchill, the then Secretary of State for War, described the atrocity as a “monstrous event” that was

“without precedent or parallel in the modern history of the British Empire.”—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1920; Vol. 131, c. 1725.]

I welcome the fact that David Cameron, when he was Prime Minister, visited the site in 2013 to pay his respects. He called the massacre a “deeply shameful event”, but stopped short of making an apology. Now is the time for the Government to go much further. The Mayor of London also visited the site in 2017 and asked the Government to make an apology. The journalist Sathnam Sanghera who comes from Wolverhampton—he grew up in Park Village in my constituency—has recorded a documentary about the Amritsar massacre that will air this Saturday on Channel 4. In a recent article, he put his finger on it when he wrote:

“As a country, it’s about time we invested some emotional energy into facing up to what happened in Britain’s name.”

I hope that the Government will recognise the strength of cross-party support in today’s debate and in the letter organised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East. I hope that the Government, if they cannot do so today, will see fit to issue a formal apology, perhaps later in the week of the actual centenary. As my right hon. Friend said, it should not take 100 years to say sorry, but it would certainly be better late than never.

3.28 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for introducing this poignant debate, nearly 100 years to the day since the tragic events of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

In 1919, during one of the first debates in the House of Commons discussing the massacre, Colonel Josiah Wedgwood commented:

“This damns us for all time.”—[*Official Report*, 22 December 1919; Vol. 123, c. 1232.]

He was correct. With 379 people officially recorded as dead—although, as we have heard today, local sources say that more than 1,000 people were killed—the British Army in India committed an indefensible atrocity in Amritsar. It had a profound effect on the Indian independence movement, and has had a lasting impact on the psyche of the people of the Punjab, and across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Yet despite the enormity of this deplorable incident, too few of us in the UK are aware of what happened at the Jallianwala Bagh 100 years ago. Not enough of us are willing to engage with our unedifying past and the legacy of the British empire. Astonishingly, no British Government have issued a formal apology for what unfolded. When David Cameron visited the memorial in 2013, why did he stop short of apologising? It is imperative that we take this opportunity to reflect today on the devastating nature of the massacre and acknowledge unequivocally that this was one of the many shameful episodes in British history and a symptom of the colonial mindset that had been developed. Crucially, the Minister must set out the Government’s plans to issue a formal apology for what happened in Amritsar. No ifs, no buts, no whataboutery or rhetorical gymnastics—Britain must say sorry.

I have been to Jallianwala Bagh several times. It is an enclosed garden with high walls, accessible only through five narrow passages. I first visited in the early 1990s and last in 2012. Every time I have been there, I have

been struck by what a tranquil, peaceful place it is—a place to remove oneself from the hustle and bustle of the streets of Amritsar, or to relax following a visit to the Golden Temple.

Let us picture the scene: it is 13 April 1919. It is a hot day, with temperatures in the mid-30s. The city is busy with pilgrims visiting to celebrate the Vaisakhi festival and farmers, traders and merchants attending an annual horse and cattle fair. Thousands of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims have gathered in the garden. What happened next is almost unspeakable. With a relatively small group of soldiers, Colonel Dyer arrived at the Bagh late in the afternoon. The entrance to the garden was blocked by some of his men. He had also brought armoured cars with machine guns. The only reason those guns were not used was that they could not get through the passageways.

On Colonel Dyer’s orders, 1,650 rounds were fired over a 10-minute period. The soldiers only stopped because the ammunition had run out. There was no warning, the crowd was not told to disperse and shots were not fired in the air but directly at the crowds. When the bullets ran out and the shooting stopped, Dyer and his soldiers left the scene. No aid was given to the wounded.

Dyer is reported to have said:

“I think it quite possible that I could have dispersed the crowd without firing, but they would have come back again and laughed, and I would have made, what I consider, a fool of myself...I fired and continued to fire until the crowd dispersed...It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd, but one of producing a sufficient moral effect...not only on those who were present, but more especially throughout the Punjab.”

That should send a shiver down all of our spines.

This was not an accident. This was not a reaction to imminent danger. This was not an officer making a poor judgment in the midst of chaos. This was cold and calculated. This was purposeful slaughter. This was meant to send a message to the Indian population to remain obedient to the colonial master or face the consequences.

When reading Shashi Tharoor’s book, “Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India”, which was published last year, the following words particularly struck me:

“The Jallianwala Bagh massacre was no act of insane frenzy but a conscious, deliberate imposition of colonial will.”

Even Winston Churchill, a man hardly renowned for his concern for the welfare of those under colonial rule, as Indian people later experienced when millions died during the Bengal famine, condemned the massacre as “a monstrous event”.

If we were able to acknowledge back then the wrong that had been committed, there is no reason why Britain should not take this opportunity on the 100th anniversary of the massacre to finally apologise. Many continue to show support for Dyer. One of them was Rudyard Kipling, who believed that Dyer

“did his duty as he saw it”

and hailed him as

“the man who saved India.”

That is illustrative of many people’s views of the empire and its subjects at the time. They considered others lesser beings than themselves. Whatever one had to do

[Chris Law]

to keep the population in check was what was necessary. In their eyes, Britain was always on the right side of history.

By refusing to apologise and engage in debate that is critical of the British empire or historical figures who played their part in it, and by embellishing the past or looking at it through rose-tinted glasses, we perpetuate that colonial mindset. While the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was shocking, the brutality exhibited that day was sadly not unique in India or, indeed, across the empire. That brutality continued.

In 1920, during the debate on Government policy on Ireland, one MP commented:

“We may have an Amritsar there.”—[*Official Report*, 9 August 1920; Vol. 133, c. 138.]

Kenyan tortured by British colonial forces during the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s will now receive pay-outs totalling £20 million. In Iraq, our American allies tortured and abused prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison, while today we are complicit in the sale of arms to others who commit atrocities in Yemen.

We cannot pick and choose our history. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre was an atrocity that must be recognised and apologised for. Concluding his speech in 1919, Colonel Wedgewood said:

“By this incident you have divided for all time races, races that might otherwise have loved one another...It has destroyed our reputation throughout the world. You know what will happen. All the blackguards in America when they lynch, will say, ‘Oh, you did the same in India.’ When butcheries take place in Russia, whether it be by White or Red Guard, they will say ‘We never did anything like what you did in India;’ and when we tell the Turks, ‘You massacred the Armenians,’ they will say, ‘Yes, we wish we had the chance of getting 5,000 of them together, and then of shooting straight—[*Official Report*, 22 December 1919; Vol. 123, c. 1232.]”

Again, he was correct that the past comes with a price. The Jallianwala Bagh is now a memorial garden, and its walls are scarred by the bullets fired by Dyer’s men.

Minister, let me put this on record, as someone who carries a British passport when I travel. On each and every visit I have had to India over many years, I carry a personal sense of shame in the knowledge that the places I visit, such as Amritsar, have a history that Britain has yet to come to terms with and apologise for. I offer my sincerest apologies here today as a beginning, and I urge the Government, on this anniversary, to set in motion from this debate a formal apology on behalf of all British citizens, who live with the legacy of what happened in India 100 years ago, and to consider all our other colonial legacies that we choose to forget.

The UK cannot lecture others until it faces up to, accepts and remedies the baggage of its colonial past and acknowledges the role it has played in conflict throughout the world. If the UK is to be serious as a major global player now and in the future, our foreign policy must reflect a moral and ethical standing that takes action on atrocities both past and present, whomever they may have been committed by. On this atrocity we must formally apologise.

3.36 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your stewardship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)

for ensuring that the debate came to the Chamber. I thank him for the detailed historical perspective he gave of the events that took place and for his words on behalf of us all about the huge grief felt at the lives that were lost. He described that in much detail and with sincerity.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for the calm and collected way in which she presented this issue. She is of Sikh heritage and is the first Sikh woman in Parliament. She has campaigned on this issue for a long time, and particularly in this Parliament. She is right that this is an important issue for the generations who came after those who were brutally murdered in that arena, with no way to escape and no exit but to drop themselves into a well. That was absolutely horrendous, and those who went in first were killed, if not by bullets, then by the people who fell on top of them. It was a difficult position for people of that origin.

My friend—I keep calling him that, because that is what he is—the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) has served in the military and understands full well the onerous conditions placed on military personnel in the battle arena. He has written about that in “The Fog of Law”, and understands those issues deeply. It is important that he is part of the debate to ask for that apology. It is important to bringing back the professionalism and integrity of our armed forces that, when such mistakes have been made, we must now look forward and try to accept them. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) said, the apology is important, because it allows people closure and to move forward. That is essentially the issue here.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) made an impassioned case and wanted to know how to move forward, as did the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law). The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has been a champion of religious rights and human rights across the whole of the world for as long as I have known him, and I have been here since 2001. He is always a strong advocate of those who cannot represent themselves. I thank him for his contribution. I also thank my mentor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), who has been taking up the case for the 30 years that he has been in Parliament. I thank him for the way in which he has supported the Sikh community. He has supported every single event and moved forward the issue of representation in the Sikh community. He has worked strongly in that community and I thank him for the great work that he does.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) has done a huge amount of work on the matter, and his letter is a considered and respectable way of trying to deal with the issue. It is time for the Government to deal with it. That is important, because it gives closure and allows people to move forward in their relationship with the United Kingdom. I say that as someone whose maternal great-grandfather was in the British Indian Army. My right hon. Friend done tremendous work for his Sikh community, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), has for hers; she spoke eloquently today.

Every speaker today has spoken about the need for the apology, which is important. The Minister needs to be able to see that. The apology, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East has said, is long overdue. The anniversary is the right time to apologise, so that we can move forward. Also, there is another instance that we should look at while looking at the Jallianwala Bagh massacre: the massacre at the Amritsar Golden Temple in 1984. I link them because of the involvement of a security services officer who was there. On this occasion we are trying to address some of the wrongs committed by our Government, and it is important to look at that instance as well. Advice was given to the Indian Government's military in relation to that.

I have a huge Sikh community in my constituency and across the whole of Birmingham, and I have heard about those two episodes from Sikhs in other parts of the country where I regularly go to events and meet people. The numbers at the Jallianwala Bagh massacre were far greater, but the massacre at the Amritsar temple was hugely devastating to people. It is important for the Minister to address both issues. An apology now is absolutely necessary to allow the generations who continually look at the issue to move forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall, mentioned the Shaheed Udham Singh Welfare Trust, which is based in my constituency and has worked for a long time on these issues. A lot of organisations do, but let us get them to move forward. I want them to look at the work that they need to do in this country and move forward the heritage of the Sikh community. Rather than looking at what has happened, I want them to look forward to the future.

Mr Virendra Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for his passionate speech. I am from Punjab originally and I know the psyche of the Indian community in general. This is the right time for the Prime Minister to publicly apologise. I mean no disrespect to the Minister. He is passionate and he has expressed in his communications how he sees the issue, but I am sure he will agree that the Prime Minister should apologise.

Mr Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right: the Prime Minister has to apologise. That is where the apology should come from, although I know that the Minister is a studious man who works hard and understands the issues. He continues to do that, and I thank him for it.

Finally, I reiterate my thanks for the great work that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East has done in relation to this letter. We need to get a conclusion; we need an apology. That apology has to be made so that we in the Sikh community, both in the United Kingdom and in Punjab, and the Muslim community and the Hindu community that were involved in the Jallianwala Bagh can have some sort of closure.

3.45 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this debate, for his long-standing work on the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, and for his tremendous commitment to south Asia. This has been a compelling debate, and in my reply I will go into some

detail. As I think hon. Members recognise, it would not be appropriate for me to make the apology today that many wish for, and I am glad that the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) recognised that in their contributions. However, I will say a little bit about the path that we are on.

It is fair to say at the outset that I have slightly orthodox views on these matters; I feel a little reluctant to make apologies for things that have happened in the past. Obviously, any Government Department has concerns about making any apology, given that there may well be financial implications to doing so. I also worry a little bit that we debase the currency of apologies if we make them in relation to many, many events. However, if the House will bear with me, I have found almost all of today's contributions extremely compelling. They were made in the right tone—one not of anger but of regret—and with a keen eye on the future. That is my view on this matter, and I assure the House that it is a work in progress. An active debate is taking place among Ministers and senior officials, not least our excellent high commissioner in New Delhi, Sir Dominic Asquith—who is of course related to Herbert Asquith, quotes from whom have come up in today's debate.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has rightly said, later this week we will mark the centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. I recognise the enduring, very deep feelings and emotions that this incident continues to raise, not just in the House but across the world. I thank my hon. Friend for setting out the full context of the events of Sunday 13 April 1919. Brigadier-General Dyer had received news that a 15,000-strong peaceful crowd had gathered in the Jallianwala Bagh—the walled public garden in Amritsar, in the heart of the Punjab. Brigadier-General Dyer entered that walled garden that afternoon with 50 rifle-armed and 40 other British Indian Army soldiers. Without warning, he ordered those soldiers to fire into the large, unarmed crowd that was gathered there, killing hundreds of protestors from the Sikh, Hindu and Muslim faiths in the space of just 10 minutes.

Let me be clear: this was a tragedy, and a shameful episode in British history. The British Government of the day rightly condemned the incident, and there was strong criticism on the Floor of the House from some unexpected quarters. Members have referred to the former Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith, and as others have pointed out, Winston Churchill—then Secretary of State for War—described it as a “monstrous event”. One century later, we as the successors of that Government recognise that people here and in India continue to feel very deeply about this issue.

There is increasingly strong recognition that a formal acknowledgement of deep regret is important to help frame the modern bilateral relationship that increasingly thrives in a wide range of globally significant areas of mutual interest in which Indian and UK values align. I have been taken by the contributions that Members have made, including what the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) rightly said. I hope that we do not preach in the world, but I think we stand up for what we regard as the rules-based international order. We stand shoulder to shoulder with India in so many of those areas that, when we state these things, we perhaps do

[Mark Field]

not entirely recognise the sense of hypocrisy arising from our colonial past. It is important that we make those acknowledgements.

We are committed to ensuring that what took place in Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April 100 years ago should not be forgotten. That is why I welcome the tabling of this debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East. It is right that we continue to pay our respects to the victims, and we shall strive to learn from and appreciate the passions that arise from these events.

We also recognise how important it is that, during the course of this year, we mark this sombre anniversary in the most appropriate way. In India, I have asked representatives from our High Commission in New Delhi to visit the site to lay a wreath on behalf of the British Government, and there will be further acknowledgement of those terrible events in the months ahead. I also reassure all hon. Members that the Government will publicly acknowledge the centenary closer to home in the United Kingdom, looking back with the deepest regret on what occurred, but also looking forward to the strong bonds that both our countries are building for the future. I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I look a little bit at some of those bonds, which are worth putting into context.

John Spellar: The Minister has heard the very strong feeling from both sides of the Chamber on this particular issue. In the light of that, will he be reporting back to the Foreign Office and to No. 10 to ask them to reconsider giving an apology for this awful event?

Mark Field: May I just say to the right hon. Gentleman that there have been many compelling speeches, and I will touch on them towards the end of my comments? He should recognise that it is not an issue of reconsidering; there is an ongoing sense of consideration that is happening in that regard. It is worth pointing out that we must always remember that issues such as this frame our history, and we expect them to do so. I believe that we have, and we must continue to do so, but it is also right that, in focusing on the future, we work to build and sustain a flourishing partnership that benefits all our citizens. It is evident that that ambition for the future was shared in the discussions that took place between Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister May at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in London last April.

Today, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) rightly recognised in his compelling contribution, we have a thriving and respectful partnership of equals. It is important to recognise that. That is why I think my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made New Delhi her very first port of call after her appointment, and why she was so pleased to welcome Prime Minister Modi to London last year. It is also why I have been to India no fewer than three times in the past 18 months, visiting Mumbai, Chennai and Hyderabad, as well as, of course, visiting New Delhi on each occasion.

As a result, I have experienced our dynamic relationship first hand, in many different ways. We share a proud parliamentary tradition, a global outlook and a commitment to maintaining the rules-based international

system, which is coming under threat from unexpected quarters, but remains the bedrock of global security and prosperity. I can testify to the fact that our relationship is characterised by close collaboration and mutual respect, and is focused on enhancing the prosperity and security of our people. That is why India and the UK signed our first framework agreement on cyber co-operation, which will help to write global rules on cyber.

We have launched our ambitious technology partnership, marrying Indian and British skills and ingenuity to drive forward the fourth industrial revolution. We also, of course, welcome many talented Indian workers to this country; indeed, we issue more skilled work visas to India than to all other countries combined. The numbers of Indians coming to visit and work and study in the UK are all on the rise, with a 35% increase in student visas, a 6% increase in work visas and a 10% increase in visit visas in the year 2018.

Stephen Pound: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I want to finish, because I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East will want to say a few words right at the end.

The Indian diaspora is the UK's largest, at over 1.5 million, contributing not only to UK prosperity but to our national culture. All that activity is underpinned by what Prime Minister Modi has rightly described as a "living bridge" between us in the form of personal, professional, cultural and institutional ties, which have shaped each other's countries and give our relationship a unique depth and created a panoply of people-to-people links.

It is right that we mark the centenary of the tragic events in Amritsar in the most appropriate way and that we never forget what happened. It was a shameful episode in our history and one that we deeply regret to this day. In the intervening years, we have learned lessons. Everything that we do today is in order to try to prevent such tragedies occurring again elsewhere in the world. Importantly, our modern relationship with India is focused on the future—on pooling our strengths, sharing our skills and knowledge, and enhancing the prosperity and security of our people. We are working together to deal with some of the greatest challenges of our age, such as climate change and infectious disease.

However, I recognise that this relationship is framed in part by the past. Although it would not be appropriate for me to apologise in the context of this debate, I have found many of the speeches very compelling. I will take up with the Foreign Secretary and No. 10 Downing Street a sense that we need to do more than set out very deep regrets, as I have done today. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and the Labour spokesman, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), have all made a strong and compelling case that we need to do more.

I am very aware of that with my own work on the future relationship. At the back of one's mind, there is always a sense—not just when one looks at the figures on trade and investment, although that is an aspect of it—that something is holding us back from fulfilling the full potential and a flourishing relationship. In all honesty, I would take a more orthodox and different view of our colonial past, but I accept that the Jallianwala Bagh massacre grates particularly strongly in the relationship between India and the UK.

In a funny way, Pakistan and Bangladesh feel that they come from the yoke of a different country, and therefore there is perhaps a stronger day-to-day relationship with those two countries than there is with India. These issues are an important way of trying to draw a line under the past. Therefore, this is work in progress and I cannot make any promises. I feel that we perhaps need to go further. As I say, I came to this issue when it was discussed some months ago. Obviously, I discussed it when I was out in New Delhi, but with a more orthodox view. I have now been persuaded—not just by this debate—to take a different approach.

So I believe that the best way to honour the memory of the people who suffered and died in Jallianwala Bagh 100 years ago is for us all to do our best to build a new partnership between the UK and India that will work for both our countries, and to recognise that such a partnership can be an important force for good in the world at large.

3.57 pm

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for answering this debate, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions. There have been three key messages. The first is that children should be taught about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in our schools, because people should know what happened in our name.

The second message is that, in taking forward our relationship and friendship with India, saying sorry—apologising for this massacre—is the right thing to do. I hope that the Government, who I am very proud to support, will take that action. Finally, if this massacre were to happen today, the people responsible would be indicted for war crimes and held to account for what they did; they would not have been buried with full military honours. We should recognise that fact, say sorry and ensure that the memories of what happened will be preserved. We should own up to what was done in our name.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

Age-related Macular Degeneration: NHS Funding

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered NHS funding for age-related macular degeneration.

I begin by welcoming the Minister to her place. I am very pleased that she is now a Minister and I look forward to having many more interactions with her.

Sight is a wonderful gift. Sight allows us to witness and experience the world we live in. It is not surprising that, in survey after survey, the fear of losing one's sight comes top in comparison with other conditions. It is remarkable that we do not hear more about the leading cause of blindness in adults, which is age-related macular degeneration or AMD for short.

AMD is the breaking down of the macula, which is the sensitive and small tissue at the centre of the retina. It is responsible for processing central vision and allows us to see colour, detail and sharpness in objects. There are two types of AMD: dry and wet. Dry AMD, which affects 90% of people with the condition, is caused by thinning of the under-layer of the macula, which can lead to blurred vision. Thinning of the under-layer of the macula is caused by small white or yellow deposits called drusen. They may at first not affect vision all that much, but as they build up over time, they can lead to blind spots in someone's central vision and can later become wet AMD.

Wet AMD is usually caused by new blood vessels growing underneath the macula that bleed and leak into the macula, which can cause blindness and distort vision in that eye. The onset of wet AMD is more rapid and can be more damaging, leading to irreversible vision loss. According to the charity Fight for Sight, AMD is the leading cause of sight loss in the UK, predominantly affecting people aged over 65. It accounts for 50% of severe sight impairment and 52% of all Certificate of Vision Impairment registrations in England and Wales.

AMD progressively damages a person's central vision, which in some cases can leave them unable to read, drive or recognise faces, although they may retain their peripheral vision. It is estimated that 600,000 people in the United Kingdom are living with late-stage AMD. Industry data suggest that by 2026 there will be 9.7 million people in the UK affected by all stages of AMD and 800,000 of them will have late-stage disease that affects their vision. Projections suggest that by 2050 the figure for people with late-stage AMD could rise to 1.3 million unless measures are taken now to address this issue.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate and I, too, welcome the Minister to her place. Significant numbers of people will potentially lose their sight. My hon. Friend has cited some of the figures. By 2050, the number of people living with sight loss will be in excess of 4 million. Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the numbers, it is time that we had a UK-wide vision strategy on eye health and sight loss?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point; I will come to that matter later in my speech.

AMD is an ever increasing public health issue, presenting as one of the number of long-term conditions that can lead to an increased risk of morbidity in patients. AMD costs the economy an estimated £1.6 billion a year and hits the productivity of society. There is a strong correlation between AMD and decreased quality of life outcomes, including an increase in depression, impaired ability to do everyday tasks, feeling more socially isolated and being 1.7 times more likely to suffer falls. Twenty-one per cent. of the annual medical cost of falls, which is £56.5 million, is attributed to those with visual impairments. The loss of independence resulting from sight loss can also be incredibly debilitating because systems are not set up to deal with it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, and I offer the Minister all best wishes in her new position. It is well deserved, and we look forward to working with her regularly in Westminster Hall and elsewhere.

My father suffered from AMD, although he did not know he had it until it had reached a late stage. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that early diagnosis is important for all matters of eye care that affect us, as is visiting an optician at least once if not twice a year? That is one positive thing we can do.

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Early diagnosis is so important, especially for wet AMD. The target requires people to be seen within 18 weeks of diagnosis, but that is unacceptable for people with wet AMD who should be seen within two weeks. Otherwise, their vision could suffer serious damage.

One concern is that the NHS has insufficient eye clinic capacity, due to delays and cancelled appointments that the British Ophthalmic Surveillance Unit has identified could lead to up to 22 patients a month losing their vision. The all-party group on eye health and visual impairment—I am pleased to see two members of the group here today—is supported by the Royal National Institute of Blind People, and in its inquiry, “See the Light”, published in June 2018, it identified 16 recommendations on which the Government should take action.

Three recommendations on which the APPG is still waiting to see progress include: the urgent need to increase the number of trainee ophthalmologists to keep pace with increasing demand; the need to ensure that sustainability and transformation partnerships—STPs—address current and future need; and the need to establish a national target to ensure that patients who require follow-up appointments are seen within a clinically appropriate time to prevent delayed and cancelled appointments.

According to statistics from the Industry Vision Group, last year three out of 44 STPs identified ophthalmology as a priority service, and only seven out of 44 met the 18-week referral target every month between January 2017 and January 2018. Early intervention for wet AMD is crucial to avoid blindness, and even the 18-week target that I mentioned to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not suitable for people with wet AMD, which requires treatment within two weeks. There is still a need to collect robust data on ophthalmology at

clinical commissioning group level in order to assess performance and learn from best practice. Some of the issues relating to delay or the cancellation of appointments may be due to systems and processes, and not necessarily to funding.

Ophthalmology has the second highest outpatient attendance of any speciality, with 7.6 million appointments in England in 2017-18 accounting for 10% of all outpatient appointments. As we are all living longer, that figure is projected to increase by up to 40% over the next 20 years. The Government could do a number of things to help improve the situation for people with AMD and other sight-threatening conditions. First, we need a national eye health strategy—that point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). Unlike Scotland and Wales, England does not have a national eye health strategy, but one is needed to address workforce capacity issues and health inequalities, and to enable better care and improvements to the quality of life for those with AMD.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a good point. In my community the Kent Association for the Blind has done a lot of work on this issue, and I was proud to visit it recently. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on her new appointment, and on her liberation in finding her voice again and being able to express her own views, albeit of course measured through those of the Government.

Bambos Charalambous: I am pleased to hear of the excellent work taking place in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

Contained within the strategy should be a minimum commitment to research similar to that given in the Government’s dementia 2020 challenge, which committed £60 million a year to dementia research, resulting in significant advances for those suffering with dementia. It is unclear how much funding has been set aside for ophthalmology from the £20 billion announced in the Government’s NHS long-term plan. I would be curious to hear from the Minister whether it is part of the plan or not.

There is also a need for the establishment of a national ophthalmology database to collect and analyse data for the purpose of improving outcomes, better decision making, and allocating resources. At present, there is fragmented data collection, such as that by the health quality improvement partnership, administered by the Royal College of Ophthalmologists, which covers only cataract surgery. A database that routinely collects information on AMD would greatly assist research and the planning of clinical care for those with AMD.

All STPs and integrated care schemes should be held accountable for developing and implanting integrated ophthalmology plans. Three years ago, the Department of Health commissioned a number of “Getting It Right First Time” reports into a series of areas, including ophthalmology. Unfortunately, that report is yet to be published, but hopefully when that happens it could inform the integrated ophthalmology plan, along with other sources such as the Royal College of Ophthalmologists’ “Way Forward” reports.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is very gracious. As I should have said earlier, I declare an interest as the chair of the APPG for eye health and visual impairment.

He is right that it is important to visit an optician to have a test for AMD, but such a visit can have other benefits. Through a person's eyes, an optician can get an idea of what that person's body is like, and can diagnose other things that are wrong. There are other benefits to visiting an optician for an early AMD test, in terms of everything that goes with it.

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We should all visit opticians on a regular basis, because they can detect a whole series of other eye conditions.

My second ask is for the publication of a workforce development plan for ophthalmology. That should also be a priority. There is already a shortage of eye care specialists who can diagnose and treat AMD. The number of ophthalmologists in the UK is the second lowest in Europe. The numbers are expected to reduce further, while the patient population is likely to increase significantly. The Department of Health and Social Care should commit to producing a workforce development plan that addresses the current situation and assesses future demand and provision need.

NHS RightCare should also develop guidance and a workstream for AMD, and data packs that can be shared as a resource and inform improvement in treatment for AMD. An IT platform that allows better integration of services is needed—for example, from primary care to hospital-based ophthalmology—so that a more joined-up approach can lead to better outcomes for patients with AMD.

Finally, it should be remembered that there is a link between sight loss and mental health, depression and frailty. The secondary effects of sight loss should also be considered when making both national and local policies on commissioning services.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend is being very generous. On that point about the impact of sight loss and the link to mental health, does he agree that a clear strategy would enable all services to be more joined up, so that when somebody is diagnosed with losing their sight all the relevant support would fall into place because there is a clear pathway?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The impact of sight loss can lead to depression and other mental health issues, so they should form part of any strategy related to sight loss. I agree with her 100%.

I ask the Minister to recognise the need for more attention to the needs of people with AMD, and to set about taking on board and implementing the suggestions that I have raised.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, as I respond to my first debate as the new Public Health and Primary Care Minister. I thank all hon. Members for their good wishes and reassure my officials that, although I have found my voice again, I will try not to alarm them too much.

I thank the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) for bringing this important matter forward for debate. Age-related macular degeneration—AMD—is a devastating disease that

seriously affects the lives of many people, particularly older people. It is the leading cause of sight loss in the UK and affects over 600,000 people. As the hon. Gentleman outlined, the two main types are dry, or early, degeneration, and wet, or late, degeneration.

Around 75% of people with AMD suffer from dry generation. For most of them, it causes milder sight loss or even near-normal vision. Although there is currently no effective treatment for that form of AMD, its impact can be reduced with vision aids. A minority of those with dry degeneration, however, will progress to wet degeneration, which can be far more serious and threaten their vision. A number of treatments for it are available, including regular eye injections or a light treatment called photodynamic therapy.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has recommended a class of drugs, anti-VEGF therapies, as the clinically appropriate and cost-effective treatments for wet AMD. Currently, there are two licensed options: Lucentis and Eylea. As such, NHS commissioners are legally required to fund those treatments for patients where necessary to comply with NICE's recommendations. NICE is currently considering whether to examine a further drug, brolocizumab, for treating AMD and recently consulted stakeholders on the suitability of referral to its technology appraisal work programme, and a decision will be taken shortly.

There is some dispute about whether nutritional therapy and a healthy diet high in antioxidants, or the prescription of supplements, can assist with the management of AMD. NHS England has advised me, however, that it has informed CCGs not to prescribe lutein or antioxidants to patients with AMD, as evidence suggests that those treatments have low clinical effectiveness.

Although we have some effective treatments for AMD, we do not rest on our laurels. Medicines continue to evolve, and we continue to look for better treatments to improve outcomes for people living with AMD. The Department provides significant funding for medical research, mainly through the National Institute for Health Research. NIHR welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health, including AMD. It is important to set out some of the ways in which NIHR engaged in advancing learning in that area and is funding research.

In 2017-18, the total spend by NIHR for eye-related research was just over £20 million. That covered a wide range of studies and trials, including research relating to AMD. In that year, the NIHR clinical research network supported 38 clinical studies and trials related to the treatment and care of people with AMD and other retina-related conditions. Since 2014, NIHR has provided £9.6 million for seven research grants and awards related to AMD, including five health technology assessment studies.

I pay tribute to the excellent work of the NIHR Moorfield Biomedical Research Centre, which is a partnership between Moorfields Eye Hospital, with its unique clinical resources that support over half a million patient visits per year, and the University College London Institute of Ophthalmology, which is one of the largest and most productive eye research institutions. The partnership was awarded £19 million over five years from April 2017. It is now conducting a wide range of ground-breaking biomedical research on AMD through

[*Seema Kennedy*]

several of its research themes, which will ultimately translate into significant improvements in the treatment, diagnosis and management of people with eye diseases.

Prevention is an absolute priority, both for me as the new Minister for Public Health and Primary Care, and for the Secretary of State, as we prepare to publish our prevention Green Paper later this year. At the heart of the NHS long-term plan that was published earlier this year is the idea that prevention is better than cure. AMD is one of the top four causes of sight loss, alongside glaucoma, diabetic retinopathies and cataracts. All of those conditions are most prevalent in older people and we know that, once lost, vision is especially hard to restore. The Royal National Institute of Blind People suggests that 50% of cases of blindness and serious sight loss could be prevented if they were detected and treated earlier. Research shows that almost 2 million people in the UK are living with sight loss, which is vision less than six out of 12. As the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate and the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) mentioned, by 2020 that number is predicted to increase by 22% and to double to 4 million people by 2050. Those increases are due mainly to an ageing population. Eye health will be particularly relevant to these matters, given that more than 80% of sight loss occurs in people aged over 60.

I pay tribute to Galloway's, a charity in my constituency that does amazing work with people on sight loss. My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), who is no longer in his place, also mentioned the Kent Association for the Blind in this capacity.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the Minister for giving way. She is picking up on some really important points. She talks about prevention, but there is a national need for a vision strategy. We cannot have prevention in isolation, nor living with sight loss in isolation. Everything needs to be joined up. Does the Minister agree that it is now time for a vision strategy to be part of the long-term NHS plan?

Seema Kennedy: I will respond to the question that the hon. Lady raised in her intervention later on in my remarks. We know that regular sight testing can lead to early detection of these conditions. In his capacity as chair of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to the importance of regular eye tests, given that, combined with early treatment, they can prevent people from losing their sight. That is why we continue to fund free sight tests for people over 60 and, alongside NHS England, are fully supporting the aims of the UK Vision Strategy to improve the eye health of people in the UK. A mark of the priority that the Department places on eye health is the inclusion in the Public Health Outcomes Framework of an indicator of the rate of avoidable blindness, both as a headline measure and by main cause, to highlight and track the direction of travel at national and local level.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate has raised a number of wider important issues for the eye care sector. Many of those were highlighted in the report from the all-party parliamentary group on eye health, "See the Light", which was published last summer. The Department welcomes this report and, along with NHS England, is carefully considering the key recommendations.

The hon. Gentleman said that eye clinic capacity was insufficient. I of course share any concerns about delays to treatment. National guidance is clear that all follow-up appointments should take place when clinically appropriate, and patients should not experience undue delay at any stage of their referral, diagnosis or treatment. To help address that issue, two key initiatives—"Getting it Right First Time", led by NHS Improvement, and the elective care transformation programme, led by NHS England—have been set up to consider what can be done to ensure that patients do not suffer unnecessary delays in follow-up care. My Department is following that work closely.

The hon. Gentleman also asks that we establish a national target to ensure that patients requiring follow-up appointments are seen within a clinically appropriate time. As I am sure he will appreciate, the intervals for follow-up appointments will vary between different services or specialties, and between individual patients, depending on the severity of their condition. That is why all follow-up appointments should take place when clinically appropriate. For patients who require further planned stages of treatment after their "referral to treatment" waiting time clock has stopped, treatment should be undertaken without undue delay and in line with when it is clinically appropriate and convenient to the patient to do so.

The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Battersea both raised the matter of a national eye health strategy. The Department takes sight loss very seriously. We are working with NHS England to ensure that the commissioning and development of eye services are of high quality and sustainable. I look forward to meeting the hon. Lady to discuss all matters relating to vision and sight loss.

CCGs are responsible for commissioning all secondary care ophthalmology services, and are also available to commission primary care services such as minor eye services and monitoring, in the community, to meet identified need. It is therefore right that the planning and commissioning of high-quality eye care services that meet the needs of the local population should happen locally, not at a national level.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate, also referred to the national ophthalmology database, and asked that it be expanded to collect data on AMD. Data is currently collected on cataracts as part of a five-year programme funded by NHS England. I understand that at an earlier stage the programme funding panel considered expanding the focus, but decided that the focus should remain on cataracts in that time-limited audit.

I recognise the hon. Gentleman's concerns and thank him for raising the matter. We are working incredibly hard, alongside NHS England, Public Health England and other partners, to ensure that eye care policy is focused both on preventing disease and, where disease develops, on ensuring that there are high-quality, sustainable eye care services for people across the country. I hope that the significant focus on effective treatment, prevention and AMD research that I have outlined means that he can reassure his constituents that we take AMD incredibly seriously. Maintaining good vision throughout life is of the utmost importance, especially as we grow older.

Jim Shannon: It might be helpful to give the Minister the report of the inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment. Perhaps

she would agree to meet the officers of the all-party group, so that they can advance that case.

Seema Kennedy: I very much look forward to reading the report of the APPG that the hon. Gentleman chairs, and to sitting down with him in due course.

My Department remains committed to preventing sight loss and to ensuring that anyone and everyone living with AMD has access to the very best treatment and support.

Question put and agreed to.

World Health: 25-Year Environment Plan

4.28 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the 25-year environment plan on world health.

I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this debate. It is only right that following World Health Day on Sunday we put time aside for an issue that I believe presents significant challenges and opportunities for Great Britain. The Prime Minister, who arguably is in a stressful job, takes time to go on walking holidays. A walking holiday I particularly remember was in 2017 but, if we put that to one side, what an endorsement that is of our countryside, and what a reminder it is for us to ensure that everyone has access to the natural environment.

I am greatly privileged as a west Cornwall MP. Some show pity that I have to travel such a distance to Westminster, but they forget that I go home to one of the most beautiful natural environments in the UK, which lays claim to areas of outstanding natural beauty, sites of special scientific interest, marine conservation zones, national nature reserves and special protection areas, to name just a few. My constituency attracts tens of thousands of visitors who flock to appreciate and soak up the good that comes with that largely unspoilt natural environment.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I notice that the Government are planning a nature recovery network. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that should include in law the protection of nesting sites of returning migratory birds such as swallows, swifts and martins, rather than the current law as it stands, which is just about bird nests with live birds in them?

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention and I am grateful for it. I shall come on to that point later on, particularly because I am the species champion for the Manx shearwater, a bird that is recovering faster than any other species and is rare to the UK, nesting only on Lundy island and the Isles of Scilly. I will talk about that very point in a minute.

I invite the Minister to come on holiday to west Cornwall—she would be welcome—and to really get the benefit of the natural environment by going on our open-top buses. At speed, people get an awful lot of fresh air, but they also come close to the vegetation that is all around—sometimes too close. It is a great way to see west Cornwall's natural environment in all its beauty, so I ask hon. Members to come and make use of our open-topped buses, which are also better for the environment in that they take cars off the road.

I understand why people come to west Cornwall to enjoy our natural environment. I can give testament to the fact that after recent weeks, and after last week in particular, time in nature can bring clarity of thought, perspective and resolve.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point. Does he agree that the value to our mental health of the environment and of time spent in it is clearly proven? In my constituency, Growing Well at Sizergh does a wonderful job, saving the NHS thousands of pounds a year by keeping people well. Does he regret, as I do, that there is no social

[*Tim Farron*]

prescribing in Cumbria to allow local people such as those at Growing Well to support more people and keep them well?

Derek Thomas: Again, I welcome that intervention. Social prescribing has proved to be a fantastic way of treating people that hopefully moves them away from medicine and drugs. In my constituency, we have a proud record of social prescribing, particularly at the Stennack surgery in St Ives, which has been doing that for some time, based primarily on the national environment and woodland, with people benefiting not only from company, but from the environment we live in.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know the hon. Gentleman is a keen walker, like me, but does he also watch television? Did he see “Countryfile” on Sunday, which celebrated the birth of the national parks? The only thing I resented about that programme this week was that it never mentioned Clement Attlee or the Labour Government, the people who campaigned so strongly for national parks. Does he agree that there is an interesting balance between access to nature and protecting the very nature that people go to see?

Derek Thomas: Yes, and I will address both that and the earlier point about social prescribing later. We have an amazing national park on the Lizard, which we are hoping to extend, and there are things there that predate modern crops. We have the potential to gain access to very early cropping, which we could use again if something happened and we ever needed to return to it. National parks are hugely important for science, research and our wellbeing.

The role of nature goes much further than just somewhere to go for a walking holiday when we are considering the future of the country. Evidence suggests that living in greener environments is associated with reduced mortality. There is strong and consistent evidence of mental health and wellbeing benefits, as has already been said, arising from exposure to national environments. Those benefits include reductions in stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression. Exposure to natural environments has been linked with improvements in heart rate, blood pressure, vitamin D levels, recuperation rates and cortisol levels. Green space may also help to reduce the prevalence of type 2 diabetes.

Respected and influential bodies have made bold claims in support of the benefits of the national environment for our health. For example, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, in its own environment plan, claims:

“Spending time in the natural environment...improves our mental health and feelings of wellbeing. It can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression.”

I think we could all do with going out in the countryside more. It continues:

“It can help boost immune systems, encourage physical activity and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as asthma. It can combat loneliness and bind communities together.”

That is something we really must prescribe at the moment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He has outlined the benefits of the countryside, but does he also recognise that the foundation for any 25-year environment plan must be sustainability in the countryside? Does he agree that countryside management through country sports,

for example, as promoted by notable projects such as Green Shoots, links members to local biodiversity plans and wildlife management that the countryside cannot survive without? Landowners and those who have a love of the countryside make it available for everyone else.

Derek Thomas: Two things come to mind. First, the environmental plan talks about protecting and enhancing the natural environment. Secondly, in our part of the world, we are seeing the roll-out of the coast path as we speak, which gives far greater access to people to get around the coast and enjoy all that is around us.

To continue with the theme of people supporting this agenda, the Office for National Statistics produced a 2017 report: “The UK environment—fighting pollution, improving our health and saving us money.” It set out the role that the environment plays in tackling air pollution and improving health. The ONS website states:

“Overall, an estimated 1.3 billion kg of air pollutants were removed by woodlands, plants, grasslands and other UK vegetation in 2015”,

saving about

“£1 billion in avoided health damage costs.”

The study by UK Natural Capital states:

“Trees in particular provide a wide range of services and account for most of the volume of air pollutants absorbed by natural vegetation in the UK”.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case and I thank him for securing the debate. I have tried to get one for ages, so many congratulations to him. On trees helping with pollution, soil is brilliant at combating climate change because it can hold so much carbon. Although we are talking about how soil management should be better, soil health is not listed as a headline indicator in the 25-year environment plan. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should try to get it in there as an indicator because the payback to society would be considerable, given that we pay £1.2 billion a year to combat soil erosion?

Derek Thomas: The Minister is best placed to respond to how we get that into the plan, but my hon. Friend is right. I have been to see scientists in my constituency who work to improve the soil not only to produce food but to protect our environment and improve and enhance natural habits. She is absolutely right to raise that point.

Public Health England states:

“There is a very significant and strong body of evidence linking contact and exposure to the natural environment with improved health and wellbeing.”

I will continue with these influential bodies. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence encourages local authorities to put pedestrians and cyclists first when designing roads, ensuring our local areas have safe and well-maintained open spaces and that everyone can get around the local area easily.

If the benefits to our physical and mental health are not enough to convince the Treasury of the importance of investing in our natural environment, the Natural Capital committee estimated in its 2015 annual report that well-targeted investment could generate large economic returns: for every £1 invested, the return was between £3 and £9. It stated that

“carefully planned investments in natural capital...will deliver significant value for money”

and generate large economic returns. It is vital that we get the Treasury on board in this debate, as well as the many other debates that happen in this place.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): My hon. Friend is making important points about natural capital and health, and I agree with all that he has said so far. However, does he agree that the real elephant in the room is the issue of climate change and its impact on human health not only in this country, but globally? Would he like to see the Government go further and faster in planning for the long-term goals on carbon reduction targets? Although we are currently meeting our carbon budget for this period, we will not meet it for the fourth and fifth carbon budget.

Derek Thomas: I am concerned now, because people have clearly read my speech. I was about to move on to that subject. I have the great honour of being a Cornish MP, as Members might have noticed. The Duchy of Cornwall was first to proclaim a climate change emergency. On Friday, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) and I worked with the council on its plans to be carbon-free by 2030.

It is right that we need to up our game. It is about caring for our environment, but it is also about spreading wealth around the country, improving the quality of our homes, improving attainment for young people, using whatever renewable means of energy we can and providing a healthier, happier environment for all of us who live on this great planet. We can be a global leader, because we have real influence to help support other countries to take this issue seriously.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. The 25-year plan is tremendous and wonderful, and I think everyone in the Chamber would applaud it, but as yet it has no teeth and no sense of urgency about climate change, the degradation of the environment or how we get young people to visit the natural world and fall in love with it. If they do not love it, they will not protect it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Derek Thomas: That is right. We had a beautiful day this week—I think it was Sunday—when I banned my children from going in the house, but I still found my 12-year-old sneaking in to play with Lego. I spent the whole day battling with him—that probably ruined it for him completely; he will never go in to the environment again.

To respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), young people are making clear their concern regarding the health of our planet. In 2009—long before I got involved in this place—I was glad to lead an activity with young people to plant hundreds of trees in west Cornwall. Those trees now stand taller than those who planted them. I am glad that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has committed to the planting of 1 million trees and that schools can access trees to plant under a Government-funded scheme. I am also glad that DEFRA's website supports the benefit of tree planting to combat air pollution and that, responding to my question two weeks ago on plans to plant trees in west Cornwall, the Minister showed that she sees the value of community tree planting schemes.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall. Trees are not only good for capturing carbon and converting it to oxygen and generally good for the landscape; by planting them on banks, and using them as flood mitigation systems, they can do good for air quality and reduce the chances of flooding in the future.

Derek Thomas: That is all part of the agenda on climate change and caring for our environment, so that we can all enjoy it. I am glad that schoolchildren who care about our planet can take action by planting trees and clearing our beaches and seas of the plastics that threaten to suffocate the health of our oceans.

Melanie Onn: On tree planting, just this week in my borough Persimmon Homes has cut down 260 trees, outside planning permission. How does the hon. Gentleman see the balance between the future built environment and the 25-year plan?

Derek Thomas: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will come to that, because the environment plan commits to environmental net gain measures in planning. That is why, as was mentioned earlier, it needs some teeth. We need to see the environment Bill, which I will ask the Minister to comment on later.

I am an enthusiastic advocate of the challenge from DEFRA to make 2019 a year of action for the environment, working with Step Up To Serve and other partners to help children and young people from all backgrounds to engage with nature and improve the environment. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) is right that if we are tearing down perfectly healthy trees to build the houses and buildings that we need, that is not the example our children need to see. The Woodland Trust can provide up to 400 trees for schools to plant, and many of my schools have done so. It has 40,000 trees left—and I am hoping to get half of them, so hon. Members will need to get in there quick.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): That recognition of the biodiversity net gain principle is incredibly important. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in condemning what seems to be becoming a pattern of developers netting off hedges? The most recent case was at the Bacton cliffs, where there was terrible footage of a sand martin that had flown back from its winter migration and was trying to return to its nest, but was being prevented by netting. It is an attempt to flout the rules that say, basically, that developers cannot interfere with hedgerows once the nesting season has started. Is it not absolutely appalling that that is going on?

Derek Thomas: I completely accept that. We must find stronger methods to manage that practice, and I wrote to the Secretary of State in the last two weeks or so to ask him how we can toughen up on it. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise it, and I am glad that she has had the opportunity to do so.

I mentioned how important west Cornwall and Scilly is. It boasts some of the most important and precious parts of natural England. For example, due to careful management we are seeing the recovery, as I said earlier, of the Manx shearwater, a rare seabird, and the storm petrel on Scilly. That seabird recovery project has brought

[*Derek Thomas*]

members of the community together to rid some of the islands on Scilly of litter and rats, which has led to the survival and remarkable recovery of these rare seabirds. There is a need to continue that work and to expand it to other islands on Scilly—as I said, there are just two places across the UK where the birds nest—and I would welcome a commitment from Government to fund this valuable and successful initiative.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): The debate title contains the words “world health”, so we are not talking just about the United Kingdom. Would my hon. Friend therefore welcome the financial investment that the Government have made in the island of South Georgia to do precisely what he was just talking about? Thanks to the RSPB, we have annihilated the mice that were destroying the birdlife. The birdlife on that extraordinary ecosystem is now returning to the vibrancy that existed before the whalers arrived more than a century ago.

Derek Thomas: That is a really valuable point. As my right hon. Friend described, and as I described in relation to Scilly, managing the rat and mice population to protect ground-nesting birds is essential. We must look at how we can develop new schemes, particularly as we leave the EU, to ensure that we fund such work properly.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) I have been applying for this debate since July of last year. I stumbled on World Health Day, and I thought if I included those words in the title I might get the debate. That is a tip for the future. As I said to the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), there is an opportunity for global Britain; that was my reference to the world.

We are also seeing the recovery of the Cornish cough in west Cornwall—another reason to visit. When we protect and enhance those natural habitats, the benefits are widespread. Wildlife, the natural vegetation and humankind all win when we get this right. I thank the RSPB, which has already been mentioned, in particular for the time that its representatives have taken to show me around some of the remarkable work that is being done to support natural habitats. I call for Government support so that that work can thrive.

As has already been said, the Government should be commended for the 25-year environment plan, which sets out the approach to protecting and enhancing our natural landscapes and habitats, leaving our environment in a better state than we found it. As we know, the plan sets out goals to create greener, cleaner air and water, goals to support plants and animals to thrive, and goals to provide a cleaner, greener country. That is the right course of action. Everyone deserves to live in a healthy, wildlife-rich natural world.

The truth is that, unlike the Prime Minister and me, many have little access to clean and green countryside. The lack of access to nature is a significant factor in health inequalities. Those living in the most deprived areas are 10 times less likely to live in the greenest areas, according to the Wildlife Trusts. Increasing access to wildlife-rich natural surroundings can help to stop the rise of preventable, life-limiting and costly illnesses, and reduce avoidable health inequalities.

Despite all the benefits of the natural environment that I have set out, public engagement with nature is low. Nearly 40% of the English public do not visit nature even once a month, with 13% of children reported as not spending any leisure time outside. I call on the Government to act quickly, and implement the nature and wellbeing policies promised in chapter 3 of the 25-year plan.

Those policies include progressing the natural environment for health and wellbeing programme, and delivering environmental measures through planning—for example, by making environmental net gain mandatory. For the Duchy of Cornwall, which has committed to becoming carbon-free by 2030, these tools are essential if we are to achieve our carbon-free ambition. Local authorities must be supported by Government and given the right resources for the right ecological expertise to ensure the greening of our towns and cities—or, in our case in Cornwall, a single city.

I am asking Government to provide an update on the progress of the commitment to incorporate nature-based, health-interfaced interventions in the NHS and the three-year natural environment for health and wellbeing programme, all of which feature in the environmental plan. GPs in my constituency have led the way in the innovation of social prescribing, as we discussed just a moment ago. It is important for the Government to clarify the timeline of the natural environment for health and wellbeing programme, so that the good work being done is adequately funded and replicated.

For the ambition of the 25-year environment plan to be realised, it is essential that the Government introduce an environment Bill that contains a legal obligation on this and future Governments to take action for nature’s recovery. As has already been mentioned, we need a nature recovery network to bring nature into every neighbourhood, and to ensure that everyone—whatever their background—has access to wildlife-rich natural green spaces every day. All this should be underpinned by statutory targets and a robust, independent watchdog that will uphold the law and stand up for the environment. I would be glad if the Minister can set out when she hopes to bring forward the environment Bill.

4.51 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, on a subject that I know is close to your heart as a friend of the fishing community and the chalk streams, and to hear such an eloquent exposition of the problems facing our country from the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). Our paths have not crossed very much since he was elected to the House. I am sure I join other members of my Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally)—in inviting him to join us on the Environmental Audit Committee, for which we currently have at least one vacancy for Conservative Members. His expertise and eloquence would be very welcome, and this is a subject that we are currently exploring in our inquiry on planetary health, which is based on the “understanding that human health and human civilisation depend on flourishing natural systems and the wise stewardship” of the natural world.

I want to signal to the hon. Gentleman that we are about to start an investigation on toxic chemicals—the various pollutants that are around us and are affecting

our hormone systems and lungs—straight after the recess. We are also about to start an inquiry on invasive species—back to the mice and rats on South Georgia—so we will have some very interesting discussions to come. Perhaps we will end up going fishing for some invasive crayfish and having a crayfish boil.

I want to say a couple of things to emphasise how grave the position of our planet's health is, highlight the link between the health of the planet and that of humans, and explain why it is so important to act now and how the 25-year plan goes some way, but still needs further work to deliver the roadmap that we need. Everything we do to the Earth, we do to ourselves. We saw that with microplastics, as we discovered that these tiny plastic particles are being pumped into our cosmetics, shower gels and shaving gels and then flushed down the drains. They now appear in every lake and river in the UK. Indeed, I believe that the River Tame in Greater Manchester is the most polluted by microbeads—again, the science is emerging in this new area of pollution.

Humanity's footprint is now so great that we are in new ecological epoch called the Anthropocene. It has been defined by scientists as

“the mass extinctions of plant and animal species, the pollution of the oceans”,

and a radically altered atmosphere because there is so much carbon.

Melanie Onn: On microplastics, has my hon. Friend had any thoughts about how they got into the food chain, in particular through fish? There is a plan for fishing and its sustainability, but how can we know the health of the fish that we consume?

Mary Creagh: One of the shocking things that we discovered in our microbeads inquiry was that if someone eats a plate of oysters or mussels, they consume 30 microplastic particles. It is particularly into those bottom feeders—that seafood—that this material goes. There is evidence, I think, that it can pass through the fish gut, so as long as the fish is cleaned, people will be okay, but we know that it is accumulating in the guts of seabirds, and we do not want our marine life to be choked, entangled and starved to death, whether that is by large plastics or smaller plastics, so I welcome anything that is done on this. We do not know whether the plastic particles act as vectors for chemicals such that the pollution that exists in the sea, that persists in the environment, attaches to these plastics and then potentially is delivered into our bodies. These are big emerging areas of science, and I am grateful to the chief medical officer for commissioning research on the matter.

We know that insects are the canary in the coalmine. That is a slightly mixed metaphor, but there is the issue of insects and insect loss. They make up two thirds of all life on Earth, but they are almost invisible and are being lost at alarming rates. Forty per cent. of species will be at risk by the end of the decade, and there is a 2.5% decline in insect biomass each year.

As the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said, this has to do with climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change special report entitled “Global Warming of 1.5°C”, published last October, warned that we have just 12 years to avoid catastrophic climate change. It warned that the rate of biodiversity loss will be twice as severe in a 2° warmed world as it will be in a 1.5° world. The difference that that makes is that in a

1.5° world, 90% of the coral reefs will be lost, so our children will be able to see the remaining 10% of coral reefs, whereas in a 2° warmed world, our children will never see a coral reef. That includes the cold-water coral reefs on the southern border of the UK as well.

Richard Benyon: Does the hon. Lady share my increasing anger that our conversation in this place and the conversation in this London postal district of SW1 among the commentariat is obsessed with one issue, which will pass and will be, in history terms, a blip in the road? What we are talking about in this debate is an existential issue, and we have to wise up to that. The young people who campaigned recently on the doorsteps of MPs need to be listened to. This is their future. We as a Parliament have to start reflecting the anger that people are starting to feel about their future, and we have to start doing something about it.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. Let me just say to the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) that I would like to get one more speaker in, so if she could finish at three minutes past 5, I would be very grateful.

Mary Creagh: Thank you for that guidance, Mr Walker. I totally agree with the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). This issue is a passion of his, and I agree with him. Young people are starting to campaign on the issue. They are being educated—this generation is certainly better educated than ours was about these issues. I pay tribute to the work of schools such as Horbury Bridge Academy in my constituency, which is doing a series of workshops on the sustainable development goals—that is the plan that the Government have signed up to—to educate primary school children about the small actions that they can take to make the big changes that we need in our world. One problem is that we can feel overwhelmed, so one of the things that we need to do is to say, “We have to start here in the UK. We have to start in our own families and in our own Parliament.” I pay tribute to the parliamentary authorities for doing so much to clean up our plastic use.

I will skip on to how the environment changes health. For example, environmental pollution causes up to 16 million premature deaths a year. That is three times the number of people killed by malaria, AIDS and TB put together and 15 times the number killed by violence and war. It is amazing that we are tackling AIDS, TB and malaria, but we are not tackling pollution because, as economic activity, it falls under “too hard”. There is something for us to think about there. We know that there are impacts here in the UK. We are seeing a rise in non-communicable diseases. Incidences of diabetes have more than doubled in the past 20 years. Two thirds of males and more than half of females in England are overweight or obese.

Another inquiry that our Committee did was on heatwaves. We have warned that a 2° rise in temperature could see the average number of heat-related deaths in the UK more than triple, to 7,000 a year by 2050. The Environment Agency has warned that within 25 years England will not have enough water to meet demand, and that problem is particularly acute in the south-east and east of England. We have rehearsed the dangers of air pollution over and over again, and I welcome the Mayor of London's introduction of the ultra low emission zone.

[*Mary Creagh*]

As I cycled in yesterday and cycled home last night, there was a notable drop in the number of cars and vans that were circulating. Perhaps that was to do with the Easter holidays, or perhaps it was all in my imagination, but it certainly felt a lot cleaner. We await the Committee on Climate Change's review of how we cap emissions at a 1.5° rise.

To finish, I will briefly talk about the Government's 25-year environment plan. That plan is necessary because of the decision to leave the European Union—a decision that I profoundly regret and that many of my constituents also profoundly regret. A tricky third of environment legislation on air, waste, water and chemicals cannot simply be cut and pasted through the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. We need to put into practice the environmental principles that we have signed up to in international law. We want our climate change commitments to be actionable and measured by any new Office for Environmental Protection, and we want an architecture of long-term, legally binding environmental targets that is supported by a five-year planning cycle and takes the Climate Change Act 2008 as its model. I welcome the plan, but I am worried about the lack of targets.

I am also worried about the lack of measurable targets to increase our green space. We on the Committee recommended that we should get urban green space back to 2001 levels to reduce the urban heat island effect. These issues are not just for DEFRA; they need to be dealt with across every Department. Great work is being done in my constituency. We are getting a new garden at the Hepworth gallery, and we have some brilliant groups, such as Friends of CHaT Parks. That group helps to run the nurseries at Thornes Park, working with adults with learning disabilities. I was also proud to plant some trees to mark the Queen's Commonwealth Canopy locally. However, achieving net zero emissions simply cannot wait. We need action across Government. We need greener cities, greener cars, greener diets, greener finance and greener Government if we are to meet that challenge. I look forward to working with the many people of good will across all parties, and of course with the Minister—who I know is working hard on these issues—to make that a reality.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): The wind-ups from the Front Benchers will start at 5.8 pm. The Opposition parties get five minutes, the Minister gets 10 minutes, and the proposer gets two minutes.

5.2 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thank you for squeezing me into today's debate, Mr Walker, and I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing it. At the outset, I will welcome the 25-year environment plan, which is a great step forward for this Government, and the environment Bill, which is the most exciting piece of environmental legislation that we have had in this country for decades. I am so proud to be part of a Government that will be bringing that Bill forward, and I hope that I can get involved in doing so.

As has been touched on, that Bill is much needed. We have had terrible crashes in biodiversity, not just in the UK but internationally. I will quote a couple of statistics. First, we have had a 75% crash in the number of

farmland birds in the UK since the 1970s. I grew up on a farm, and I used to see yellowhammers every day as I went to school. I have not seen one in years and years; I do not know who else has.

Richard Benyon: Come to my farm.

Rebecca Pow: I will go to my right hon. Friend's farm in Berkshire, but there are certainly very few yellowhammers left in Somerset.

There has also been a two-thirds crash in the global population of flying insects. Insects are our friends: we need them, and we cannot survive without them. I did entomology as part of my university course, and people probably thought that was amusing, but it is proving very useful. Insects pollinate our crops, and we need a world in which they can thrive. It is very important that we put legal obligations into the environment Bill that commit us to achieving all the things that are stated in the environment plan and that will hopefully be put into that Bill.

Nature recovery networks have been mentioned. I have been involved with the Somerset Wildlife Trust, which has a very good model for those networks; I believe the Minister knows about them. They are like a framework for all land use and all the things that go on to a piece of land, so that we can work out what is important, what to concentrate on, what has disappeared, what we can add and what we need to work on. They are very important.

I would also say that our rural areas will be important to us in the future, because they are like the lungs for the urban centres. They provide us with green space, places for tourism, places to grow food, flood control and all those things. We need a much bigger agenda to bring the rural area into helping us to solve our biodiversity problems.

Dr Wollaston: Does my hon. Friend feel that there should be greater penalties for acts of environmental vandalism, where developers come in and clear wildlife corridors and later on we find that the tree survey, for example, shows that there are no trees because they have cut them all down? The current penalties for that are simply not sufficient. It has happened in my area in Dartmouth and caused great upset and loss to the environment.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning that, because it leads me on, interestingly, to ancient woodland. I am pleased that this Government, through the all-party parliamentary group on ancient woodland and veteran trees and the Woodland Trust, and working with many colleagues, have managed to get extra protection for ancient woodland. In future, developers should not be able to bulldoze ancient trees down in the way they used to. Those trees are very precious, as is the soil underneath them. We must get teeth so that we can hold people's feet to the fire and ensure that those things do not happen.

I was pleased to hear just this week that we have nearly one quarter of a million pounds to do an ancient woodland inventory. That money came from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but I am sure that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be interested in the project. It will

mean that we can identify all those precious woodland sites and trees, so that we can help to protect them in future. If we do not know what is there, how do we know whether we can protect it?

I praise the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, which I was so proud to be a part of, because that Committee held the inquiry into plastics and microbeads—all credit to the Government, again, for bringing in the microbeads ban. They are only 2% of all plastics, but they were something controllable. The ban is a good start and proves that we can do these things if we want to. The Committee also conducted the soil inquiry, which revealed so much; I do not think soil had ever been talked about in Parliament before.

As I mentioned earlier, it is so important to get the biodiversity and health of our soil right. I reiterate my call to make it an indicator in the 25-year plan and give it the credit it needs as a public good in the Agriculture Bill, because without it we cannot have healthy food. It holds our carbon. We can achieve all our climate change commitments because of that property of soil—its ability to hold carbon. If we get the management of that right, we have ticked a massive box on the way to meeting our net zero targets. I am optimistic on climate change; this Government are making huge strides on the issue, for which they are not getting enough credit. I am optimistic, having had many meetings about this, that we are going in the right direction, and I believe that we will meet our net zero targets sooner than we think.

I have to wind up, so I will say that we need to get climate change sorted. I understand how important it is. As part and parcel of that, we need to get biodiversity sorted. We owe it to the nation. I am pleased that the Chancellor mentioned all that in his spring statement, and I am pleased that we have a Minister who understands this.

5.8 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this great debate. I must tell him that I visited his constituency some time ago on a painting holiday. It is obvious that he values the role of communities and I can honestly say that, like my mum Rosa, he appreciates the importance of how great little things are in our communities. That came across very well.

When reporting on the Government's 25-year plan in July 2018, the EAC welcomed cross-Government ambition for the restoration and recovery of our natural environment, but what worried the Committee was the lack of detail on how to achieve those objectives. We all know that behavioural change is required worldwide, within Government, in our towns, cities and streets, and across our communities.

As the Scottish National party spokesman on the environment, I will take this opportunity to speak on Scotland's role in planetary health. All political parties in Scotland have placed the environment at the heart of the Government's plans. Indeed, other countries are now looking to Scotland for a lead. For example, our progress on climate change was praised as "exemplary" by the United Nations climate change secretary; for your information, Chair, the Scottish Government are on course to smash our goal to reduce emissions by 42% come 2020.

Some examples of the Scottish National party's progressive government have resulted in praise from Norway for our proposed deposit return scheme, an initiative that is soon to be introduced. Confor—the Confederation of Forest Industries—the aim of which is to support sustainable forestry and wood-using businesses, welcomes the Scottish Government's pragmatic and positive approach to forestry and land management. Those are good examples of working with and listening to professionals.

If I may be a wee bit self-indulgent, I should like to point out the contrast between the Scottish Government's thinking and Westminster's dismissive thinking. On 12 February, I petitioned the Department for Transport to consider using the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to issue penalty points to drivers caught littering from their vehicles. The Minister's reply was disappointing. He said that the courts issue penalty points, not the DVLA. To me, that showed more concern for process than for progress.

In contrast, last week Rosanna Cunningham MSP said:

"There can simply be no excusing the practice of littering from vehicles".

She has committed to bringing forward new legislation, as part of the Circular Economy Bill, to tackle that avoidable national embarrassment. Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform not only says what she means, but means what she says.

Scotland's rich and diverse natural environment continues to offer fantastic opportunities to our economy. The Scottish Government recognise the link between access to quality natural spaces and the benefit to health and wellbeing. Scotland accepts its responsibility for leaving a better planet to future generations and is taking a leading role in reducing carbon emissions by setting the most ambitious statutory climate change targets of any country in the world for 2020, 2030 and 2040. That means that Scotland will be carbon neutral by 2050.

Furthermore, the Scottish Government are encouraging reduction of energy use and promoting more energy-efficient lighting to reduce Scotland's overall carbon emissions and maintain the quality of our skies. I have attended busy meetings in our local communities to promote better lighting, the more efficient use of everyday products and products that use a traffic light warning system to reduce water waste. In short, our communities care about their environment.

In Scotland, we have a rich and diverse natural environment. My job here is to speak up both to protect that environment, which supports a huge variety of opportunity for our community, through jobs and a sense of wellbeing, and, importantly, to prevent any slip back to the UK becoming known as the dirty man of Europe once again.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 15 minutes for a vote in the House. The SNP spokesperson has 50 seconds to wind up when he gets back.

John Mc Nally: Thank you for your generosity.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): We might make it run to a minute—just to be generous.

5.12 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.27 pm

On resuming—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mr Mc Nally, your final minute, and I will hold you to it.

John Mc Nally: Apology accepted; it is not your fault, Mr Walker.

It is important that we all do our bit to help the environment and the wellbeing of our wider world. Biodiversity is at the heart of a thriving, sustainable Scotland. I believe that if we want to change the world, we should get busy in our own little corner. In Scotland, we are doing just that.

5.27 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate my fellow west country MP, the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), on securing this important debate, and for introducing it so eloquently. I especially liked his phrase that we have to “up our game”. He rightly encouraged ministerial colleagues to do that. Our environment needs to be taken more seriously by all Members of Parliament and all those in public office if we are to meet the challenge that we face.

It has been a good debate. The Division has led to a slightly emptier Chamber than we had a moment ago, but we heard some fantastic contributions from speakers from right across the political spectrum. I especially pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who spoke about the importance of bird nesting—a subject that now has media attention, not only because of the horrendous footage on social media today of sand martins trying to get through nets to get back to their nests.

There is also concern about the practice of developers netting trees to prevent birds from nesting, and the sense that that is being done against the best interests of our natural world. Hon. Members on both sides of the House feel aggrieved by that, but we have the powers in this place to do something about it. We must call out developers who use cruel, inhumane tactics against our wildlife and, if they persist in such behaviour, we must introduce regulation to prevent it.

I also pay tribute to the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who spoke so eloquently about microplastics. We need Ministers to rise to the challenge of how we test for microplastics, ensure that we are using common science across all forms of testing and create a safe level and an action plan not only to reduce microplastics and microfibres but to tackle what is already in the natural world.

I pay tribute to those Members across the House who mentioned insect loss, a subject which my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) led a good debate on only a few weeks ago. Despite many of us not being huge fans of creepy crawlies, we need to spend more time on that. We need to focus not only on bees but on a wide variety of insects that are vital to our natural world.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for St Ives for talking about public engagement with nature. If we are truly to value and protect our natural habitat, we need to ensure that people visit it, understand the value of it, and get something from it. It is deeply disturbing how few people engage with our natural world. I am leading the campaign for Plymouth Sound to be designated the country's first national marine park—the first, but I hope the first of many. Some 20% of our young people in Plymouth, Britain's ocean city, have not even seen the sea, and 50% have not visited a beach. Those were the findings of the fairness commission that was run by Plymouth City Council. Those should be the type of statistics that scare us all. That is a city right on the coast, so much more needs to be done.

At the last DEFRA questions on 28 March the shadow Environment Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), declared a climate and environment emergency, on behalf of the Opposition, at column 534. She challenged the Minister to join us in cross-party working to jointly declare a climate crisis. Ministers did not agree to do that, but I hope that the Minister will recognise the importance of cross-party working in relation to declaring a climate crisis. In local government up and down the country, Conservative, Labour, Green and Liberal Democrat councillors, and others besides, have been working in collaboration to declare local climate crises. The public and the young people whom the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) spoke about expect politicians in this place to do something similar and declare a climate crisis at national level. We can then take cross-party action against it.

The 25-year environment plan is a good start, but we need much more besides. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) spoke with passion about the need for action and that is something I want to impress on the Minister. Since the Environment Secretary took office there have been 76 DEFRA consultations, but only one piece of primary legislation. It is not good enough to be the Secretary of State for consultations. We need to tackle climate change properly, which means that we need proper action. I implore the Minister to tell the House when the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill will make a comeback, and when the environment Bill, for which the hon. Member for St Ives made a good case, will be seen. We need action, not just warm words.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): A beautifully timed speech from the shadow Minister.

5.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing the debate. He spoke eloquently about the beautiful part of the country that he represents. Of course I have visited it more than once, and for me Mousehole stands out particularly. It is right that we should talk about elements of the countryside, but I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that we also need to tackle the urban environment, recognising that more than three quarters of the population live in towns and cities.

The 25-year environment plan sets out how we will deliver our commitment to pass our planet on to the next generation in a better condition than it was in when we inherited it. As I said last week to the Environmental Audit Committee, during its inquiry into planetary health, the 25-year environment plan is one of a growing set of strategies intended to have a positive impact on the health of humans and the planet that sustains us. It may be a plan for England, but its ambition extends to the world beyond. It commits us to taking on an even more prominent international role in protecting the planet, whether by pushing the agenda on climate change, tackling biodiversity loss, or leading by example through the development of innovative approaches such as natural capital accounting.

The hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) is right to say that Scotland is playing its part—certainly with respect to biodiversity. He mentioned littering from vehicles, and the Government have already taken the power in question. The legislation is in place and councils have powers to make it easier to find the owners of vehicles from which littering takes place. I look forward, on this occasion, to the Scottish Parliament and Government catching up.

A key component of the 25-year environment plan's domestic strategy is connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing. There is increasing evidence, which has already been widely discussed in the debate, that spending time in the natural environment improves our mental health and wellbeing. It can reduce stress and depression, boost immune systems and encourage physical activity. It may even reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Several Members referred to a mental health programme, the natural environment for health and wellbeing programme, DEFRA, NHS England, Public Health England and Natural England, along with the Department of Health and Social Care, are already working together in alliance, and more information will be made available later in the year. However, I want to stress that this programme has already launched two evidence-gathering projects to inform the design of the programme. We have also established a board to oversee the implementation and, once the evidence-gathering exercises have been completed, more information will be available.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced last year a £4.5 million investment to boost social prescribing. As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said, that is an important part of what can be done. I know that several Members recognised that in the debate.

In terms of our youth, the Government have committed £10 million to our Children and Nature programme. That programme will make school grounds greener and make it easier for pupils to visit green spaces, particularly those children from disadvantaged areas. It is also intended to increase community forest and woodland outreach activities and to transform the scale and scope of care farming.

Richard Benyon: Is the Minister, like me, pleased that, when she was working in 2011 with her boss, the current Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, when he was Secretary of State for Education, the natural environment White Paper reduced the health and safety guidance for schools for learning outside the classroom from more than 100 pages down to just

11 pages? It is that kind of change, right across government, that can make a difference to getting people out into the countryside—particularly the young.

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course, he authored that paper, which is why it is so excellent and long-standing. He is right to push that particular issue. He should not be modest. I am sure that he will give credit to my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman); but I know that he was the driving force.

As has been said, 2019 is the year of green action and is providing a focal point for organisations, individuals, communities and businesses to learn more about their environmental impact and take action to reduce it. That is why we have partnered with the charity Step up to Serve, to help encourage environmental youth social action through their #iwill4nature campaign. I also met with the Minister for Civil Society and know that she will be taking this up with the National Citizen Service, to make sure that it is also fully involved in these projects, not only this year but, I hope, going forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives referred to the benefits of tree planting. Besides the social benefits of community forests, to which I have already referred, it is true that trees benefit us economically and environmentally, in particular in sequestering carbon dioxide. That is why the 25-year environment plan sets out our ambitions for tree planting. In addition to the 11 million trees that we have committed to plant across the country, we will ensure that 1 million more are planted in our towns and cities. We have also been consulting on the rules that we want to see in place to make it harder for councils to cut down trees when they become a nuisance, rather than being cherished for what they are.

Mary Creagh: The Minister is making some powerful points, particularly about community forests—bringing forests closer to people. That is certainly a welcome change, after the attempts to sell off the forest. Can she tell us who is monitoring these 1 million trees? Who is counting them, and how will we know when those targets have been reached?

Dr Coffey: I used to have the forestry portfolio, but that is now the role of my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley). I am afraid that I do not have that information to hand; the hon. Lady may wish to pursue that question in a different way.

In January last year, alongside the launch of the plan, the Prime Minister announced £5.7 million to accelerate development of a new northern forest, signalling the importance that we attach to tree planting. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives said, he is supporting a group of schoolchildren in his constituency to plant more trees. I am very pleased that they have taken up that project. In 2016, the Government launched the Schools for Trees project, and provided funding for 400,000 trees to be planted, which directly matched the corporate-sponsored programme already organised by the Woodland Trust. I am glad that he is taking advantage.

Hon. Members have referred to climate change. There are many stressors on planetary health, which have already been referred to—human population growth and climate change being the most significant. As climate change affects the environmental and social determinants of health, under future climate change scenarios impacts

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

could intensify, increasing existing disease burdens and widening health inequalities if no interventions are made. Mitigating and adapting to climate change is one of the fundamental goals of the 25-year environment plan. Once we leave the EU, we will introduce an environmental land management system that will be the cornerstone of that intervention, changing the way farmers and land managers manage their land to deliver this crucial goal. Although I do not know when the Agriculture Bill will complete its stages, that will of course be part of it. Environmental land management will be supported by other interventions related to waste management, soils, agriculture and forestry—each playing a critical role—as set out in the plan.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) that we undertook a recent consultation that proposed an indicator framework including soil. She will be aware of some of the challenges in trying to make that assessment. I suggest that she looks out in the next couple of days for my written answer to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy).

Globally, the UK played a leadership role in securing the 2015 Paris agreement and continues to work to ensure that subsequent negotiations unlock ambitious action. The Government are on track to deliver their commitment to providing at least £5.8 billion of international plant finance between April 2016 and March 2021. Through this fund, the UK has helped 47 million people cope with the effects of climate change. DEFRA's investments alone are expected to save 70 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions. This funding will go to projects such as the Blue Forest project in Madagascar and Indonesia—a £10.1 million programme that is reducing deforestation of mangrove habitat, helping to support sustainable livelihoods and community health and increasing climate resilience in coastal communities. I am pleased to say that we have also added some funding to a project to prevent mangrove deforestation in the Caribbean, focusing particularly on Belize.

Although much more progress is needed globally on the greenhouse gas emissions generated by energy and transport in particular, we need to increase substantially the focus on nature-based solutions, to reduce the pace of climate change and fulfil much climate change mitigation as well as adaptation.

Biodiversity change is intrinsically linked to climate change and is another key indicator of planetary health. It underpins many benefits enjoyed by individuals and

communities, from the food we eat to clean air and water and the endurance of nature. The plan represents a step change in ambition for nature through its goal to see thriving plants and wildlife. As such, we are investing in peatland and woodland restoration, which contribute to climate change mitigation and provide important wildlife habitats. The House will know that we are establishing a nature recovery network as a key contributor to our ambition to create or restore 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat, which will provide wider benefits for people. I expect the new environment Bill, which will include a number of ambitious measures, to be the first Bill in the next Session of Parliament. Internationally, the UK is committed to playing a leading role in developing an ambitious post-2020 framework.

On bird netting, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is on the case. On Bacton cliffs, the nets are there so that the birds rest somewhere else; they are protecting the birds. The challenge is that the eroding coast is a risk to birds, and the nets are being checked three times a day to make sure that no bird becomes stuck. I am conscious of what is being said about the matter, and we will continue to look at it carefully, but there are balances that we must strike to ensure that nature is preserved.

5.42 pm

Derek Thomas: I am grateful to Back-Bench Members and Front-Bench Members for their contributions. I am glad of the opportunity this afternoon to talk up the environment plan, and I am grateful to the Minister for setting out some of its benefits. I was pleased to hear her talk about the value of nature-based solutions to climate change. We were right to focus on that this afternoon. This is an urgent issue that engages people in politics—even if we have our eyes elsewhere—and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to talk about something that matters to people and in which they can engage and be part of the solution. I am pleased that we are beginning to look at how we can give equal access to the great planet that we live on and to our natural environment.

*Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,*

That this House has considered the effect of the 25-year environment plan on world health.

5.43 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 10 April 2019

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

British Steel Pension Scheme: Transfers

9.30 am

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pension transfers and the British Steel pension scheme.

For many of us, pensions are a distant, complex and opaque topic. Everyone hopes that their pension will provide financial security for their family's future. It is often the single biggest pot of money that anyone will have, but that makes pension pots ideal targets for mis-selling. Unfortunately, in recent years pensions mis-selling has got worse. Since further pension freedoms were brought in four years ago, it is easier to transfer out of defined-benefit pension schemes. More than 200,000 people have done that, but as transfers have increased, so have the problems. The compensation paid out for poor transfer advice increased to £40 million last year.

I called for this debate because of a specific mis-selling crisis that affected hundreds and potentially thousands of people across south Wales in particular. Two years ago, the British Steel pension scheme began to restructure its fund after a difficult period for the industry. Scheme members had a hard deadline to make a critical decision: they could go into a new scheme, be defaulted into a lifeboat fund or transfer out. They had to decide against a backdrop of serious uncertainty about the scheme and the industry. The scheme's administrators were under enormous pressure, with 4,000 calls a day. Vital information about pension advisers from the Financial Conduct Authority was often highly technical. All that helped to create a perfect storm.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and commend the work that he is doing in this area. He has mentioned the Financial Conduct Authority. Does he agree that one issue here is regulation and that too often those who suffer a loss are pushed in the direction of a civil remedy when actually we need stronger enforcement and tougher criminal sanctions?

Nick Smith: I agree. I think that the FCA has the right teeth but is not using them and that the police need to intervene much earlier.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on initiating the debate. I do not have any people with steel pensions in my constituency, but I am here to support the hon. Gentleman and to do so on the record. He mentioned that 4,000-plus people a week were trying to get details and advice on how to move forward. Is not the onus on the FCA and, ultimately, the Government to ensure that the necessary advice is there and available? The volume of contacts being made clearly indicates that the system is unable to respond in the way it should.

Nick Smith: The advice is there. The difficulty is that for many people it is too technical and complicated; working through it is really very hard.

Transfers were talked up, and pension sharks soon began circling around the key steelworking sites across south Wales and the rest of the UK. They were often facilitated by unregulated introducers, through word of mouth. For example, constituents of mine were approached by a rogue financial adviser at their caravan while they were on a family holiday. Wider possibilities were common currency: a place in the sun, a conservatory and a deposit for a son's or daughter's new home were all said to be within reach.

The pension changes meant that it was easier to transfer from a stable fund into investments that were far riskier, on the promise of better returns. Unfortunately, it meant that a safe bet could turn into a bad bet, and a high fee was often part of the deal too. It was the case that 7,800 steelworkers transferred out altogether, of whom 872 had transfers arranged by firms that were eventually ordered—to stop advising by the FCA. One steelworker lost £200,000. Many others lost tens of thousands of pounds. Many suffered incredible stress and anxiety. I heard yesterday that £1.8 million has been paid out in compensation to steelworkers so far. I emphasise the words “so far”. Because that might not grasp the full scale of the issue, the FCA has now reviewed the files of 2% of the nearly 8,000 steelworkers who transferred out. It found that 58% of the advice was not suitable, which means that the tally of those who lost out could run to several thousands. To deal with that possibility, the FCA now needs to set out a clear programme of how it will identify the steelworkers affected, how it will let them know and what practical support it will provide to help to get them through this process.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and leading on this issue, as he has now for several years. On how the FCA now informs steelworkers, does he agree that part of the problem is that lots of steelworkers will simply not know that this has happened and will not understand that they have received bad advice? Given that these are complicated issues, as he has mentioned, that means that they will often just ignore the issue in the hope that it will somehow resolve itself. This could be yet another pension scandal waiting to happen, purely because people do not wish to face up to the realities of what is happening.

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend makes a really good point. The FCA is a large organisation based in London. I believe it does not have sufficient resources to help consumers on the ground in places such as Port Talbot or Shotton, or across the country, where pensioners need support at their homes.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The concerns that my hon. Friend has raised are valid in north Wales among steelworkers who used to work at the Shotton plant, many of whom live in my constituency. A cursory look at the FCA website reveals that there are 17 firms that the FCA is currently examining. I did not know that until I looked at the site in preparation for this debate. How are steelworkers supposed to know who those 17 firms are?

Nick Smith: My right hon. Friend gets to the nub of the situation. Who does one trust when one has a pot of gold and people want access to it? He poses a really important question. The FCA has got to help our steelworker pensioners and their families.

[Nick Smith]

It can be argued that this was a unique situation, but many of the underlying problems that allowed it to happen are still there. Rogue financial advisers do not face sufficiently tough consequences from the regulators. The FCA's register has been improved, but consumer information sometimes remains unclear. The support for people who might have been mis-sold pensions is insufficient.

I recognise that some steps have been taken to improve co-ordination between regulators. That is welcome, but much more needs to be done. At the moment, the pension sharks have generally received administrative sanctions only, but I think they need to face serious penalties. Will the Minister scrutinise the effectiveness of the FCA's enforcement regime? Steelworkers say the FCA needs to impose heavy financial penalties on bad financial advisers. I think it needs to employ its powers much more often, as it seems this has not been done sufficiently.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and pay tribute to him for his work for our constituents in this important area. At our recent meeting with the FCA, the issue of mandatory insurance wording came up. Those unscrupulous financial advisers are not taking out proper insurance—when they go bust, there is no source of compensation for the steelworkers who have been ripped off. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister needs to take urgent action to improve the regulatory framework, not least in the area of mandatory insurance wording?

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Given reports that the FCA is investigating so-called introducers in connection with a major scam, the Government should now ensure that they, too, are regulated. The Treasury has to take action to ensure that financial advisers always have—this comes to my hon. Friend's point—sufficient insurance to pay out, should they go into administration.

Will the Minister ensure that the FCA updates the Treasury on how it is supporting the potentially several thousand steelworkers who might have received poor transfer advice in this instance? The Treasury needs to co-ordinate with the Department for Work and Pensions and other key bodies in order to help victims of mis-selling to access the support they need. Although BSPS members have been supported by a strong team in Port Talbot, including a financial adviser and a lawyer, there needs to be a single initiative, aimed specifically at people who may have been mis-sold in cases such as BSPS.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am very grateful to my good friend for giving way and congratulate him on securing the debate and on the powerful case that he is making. In the consultation on the changes, concerns were raised that the burden could fall too heavily on scheme members, and we worry that that is the case. Our mining and steel communities built this nation. Does my hon. Friend agree that they should be looked after in retirement?

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend is a champion for miners' pensions, on which she has done some great work, and I think she is absolutely right.

I press the Minister on the Treasury's response to recommendations that others have made about the crisis. The Rookes review suggested that the FCA needs to look at how it handles advisers who have had regulatory issues in the past. Phoenixing, as it is called, has allowed some advisers to reinvent themselves to sell anew. There must be greater scrutiny to stop rogues re-emerging in the marketplace. The review also suggested that the FCA work with the Treasury and the DWP to use digital channels to help to communicate important information to pensioners and to help them.

Finally, the review suggested that the Pensions Regulator work with BSPS, trustees and trade unions—Community and Unite have been particularly good in south Wales—to select a panel of reliable financial advisers that members can use. Those advisers must be able to deal with the scale of the problem with BSPS and with the insurance needed. Can the Minister explain how the Department is progressing those recommendations and when we can expect the changes to be fully implemented?

In his valedictory speech, Mark Neale, the outgoing chief executive of the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, strongly advocated increasing the compensation limit in cases of poor transfer advice. They were powerful remarks, so let us listen to him. I ask the Treasury to actively support that proposal and to investigate how many people are currently suffering uncompensated financial losses because of poor advice.

We need justice for steelworkers who are ripped off. If the FCA will not do that, local police forces in south Wales need to pursue what appear to be complicated cases of fraud. The crimes are committed locally; the losses are clear and often substantial; and those responsible are identifiable. I call on the police forces across south Wales to open files and thoroughly investigate whether those cases amount to fraud. Criminal investigations have to start. If they do not, I call on the forces to state publicly why not.

The financial and emotional toll that this crisis has taken on my constituents and many others has been heavy. They worked hard for decades to earn their pensions, and they expected a secure pot to provide for them and their families. That was put at risk because of the wrongdoing of a few bad actors and a weak response from the regulators. Steelworkers and their families have been let down. The Government and the FCA must improve their act and support those people better. The rogues who ripped off steelworkers and their families must be held to account. If the regulators cannot do that, the police need to step in. We need to make sure that good people see their hard-earned money better protected in future.

9.44 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I pay tribute once again to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing the debate and for all the work that he does. He and I have worked on the transfer of steelworker pensions out of BSPS since 2017, which was when all Tata Steel workers were forced to decide whether to move into the BSPS 2 or transfer out into another pension scheme. Given that trust between employees and employer at that point was fragile to say the least, it is not too surprising—completely understandable, in fact—that about 8,000 of the steelworkers decided against joining the BSPS 2. Little did they know that the vultures were circling.

The behaviour of the unscrupulous financial advisers who ripped off these men and their families was completely inexcusable. The sheer size of the pension transfer exercise, the high level of publicity that the transfer received, and the workers' deep-seated mistrust of the employer at that time, the trustees and Tata made for fertile territory for the parasites. The trade unions, steel MPs and the BSPS trustees all called on the Government to introduce a system of deemed consent regarding the transfer of BSPS 2. I was one of those MPs; I sent a letter to the then Pensions Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke). However, we were ignored and those hard-working, honest men were targeted, despite the fact that in only a very small number of cases was transferring out their best option.

These unscrupulous advisers are not stupid; they have behaved in a manner that is cunning, morally bankrupt and in many cases criminal. These events have had a dreadful effect on steelworkers in my constituency and their families. One man transferred £560,000 out on the strength of a 40-minute phone call with an "adviser", who convinced him that it was what everyone was doing—40 years of service reduced to 40 minutes on the telephone. He believes that he was charged £11,000 to transfer out and for a 40-minute consultation. A man's entire life plan was ruined by one phone call. Another was advised by one of the local advisers to transfer £348,858 out. He is now paying in excess of £3,500 a year in various costs and charges, as well as exposing himself to the risk of shortfall and dying after his pension pot runs out. That adviser played on the fear that BSPS was going to go into administration. They did not present my constituent with the facts or evidence, but approached the situation from the starting point that he wanted to transfer out, and facilitated that transfer without checking that it was in his best interest to do so.

Who were those unscrupulous financial advisers? The main culprits have been Active Wealth (UK) Ltd and a man named Darren Reynolds, who account for all but a couple of the 77 cases that have so far been taken up with the Financial Services Compensation Scheme. The FSCS has so far paid out £1.8 million to 61 of the 77 claimants, 16 of whom exceeded the £50,000 compensation limit—a limit that has since risen to £85,000. For those who have not been granted compensation, it is purely because they have not suffered a loss, not because they were not badly advised. I think I am right in saying that every single claimant was judged to have been badly advised.

It has been clear for some time that Active Wealth was just the tip of the iceberg. Several other advisers have been acting inappropriately; one did a lot of work in concert with a financial adviser who did not have the required permissions. The transfers were going through in about one hour, and some steelworkers never even met with an adviser. In another part of the country, in west Wales, an adviser had the required permissions, but by the end of 2017 had had their permissions to do pensions transfers revoked. Scores of steelworkers were days away from the transfer cut-off when that adviser circled in. Other advisers saw the writing on the wall and went into voluntary liquidation a few months ago. Those two advisers took their clients with them, literally next door.

Other sales tactics were entirely risible. In one case, steelworkers were turning up at an adviser's office over the weekend because he had told them that on Monday the pension company would be stopping distribution in the UK. He was literally telling them to hurry up and buy; he spent 30 minutes talking to each steelworker about their pension. It is notable that those financial advisers are finding it easier to simply lock up shop, close their business down and walk away than to face up to what they have done. That, in effect, then limits the redress that steelworkers can receive to £50,000—now up to £85,000—under the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, and from £150,000 under the Financial Ombudsman Service. In effect, we have a deep structural problem in the system, with financial advisers able simply to lock up shop and walk away, rather than give redress to the people they have ripped off. That is a fundamental question for the regulator.

These men were let down not just by rogue financial advisers, but by the authorities: the regulator, namely the Financial Conduct Authority, and the Government. The FCA was far too slow to see the obvious risks and act to protect steelworkers from these vultures. It knew from its investigation in 2017 that more than half of the transfer advice being given was not up to its own standards, but even that, apparently, did not raise any alarm bells or red flags. Most shockingly, certain financial advisers who were under investigation still appeared on the FCA website. The fact that that information was unavailable to the steelworkers feels utterly unjust.

The focus now is to raise awareness among steelworkers who have not spoken up but are due compensation, and to ask them to come forward and seek advice. Something that we have all observed is the role of shame in that. Many steelworkers are deeply embarrassed and ashamed that they have been ripped off. They have found it extremely difficult to share that difficult information with their families and spouses—one of the reasons that more men have not come forward.

I recognise that this is an emotionally sensitive matter for those involved, who may be reluctant to overturn the rock and look at what they might find underneath. However, it is right that we do everything that we can to get justice for these men. Investment companies and self-invested personal pension providers must no longer be able to look the other way and adopt a "see no evil, ask no questions, tell no lies" approach as long as the money continues to roll in. That approach is morally bankrupt.

Since the end of 2017, I have been working with my hon. Friends the Members for Blaenau Gwent and for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), lawyers and independent financial advisers in order to bang the drum and get these steelworkers the justice that they deserve. In November, 18 steelworkers came to Westminster to meet the regulators and the FSCS. We were pleased that the FSCS was able to revisit some of those adviser charges. We have also had very welcome promises from the FCA to run seminars in Port Talbot. Tata has also shown a willingness to facilitate meetings with the men—all in the cause of raising awareness. That means that we can at least be optimistic that getting these men some of the justice that they deserve may be possible.

Looking forward, our main focus must be, first, to continue to raise awareness among the steelworkers who may be affected. All firms that gave advice to transfer

[Stephen Kinnock]

should verifiably send out a letter written by the FCA, strongly advising them to get the advice looked at and reminding them that they may be entitled to a form of financial top-up if they come forward. We will keep pressing the FSCS and FCA to offer the level of compensation package that the men who have come forward deserve and are due. We will also focus relentlessly on ensuring that unscrupulous advisers are exposed for what they are, and that every bit of insurance that they owe is claimed.

Secondly, we must do all we can to achieve legislative change. We need to ensure that individuals are automatically enrolled in new schemes, not left to be picked off mercilessly by rogue financial advisers in an environment that is characterised by uncertainty. Thirdly, we need to ensure that regulators do their jobs. Why the advisers that I mentioned were allowed to remain on the FCA website while under investigation seriously needs looking into.

Finally, it is worth noting that this issue does not affect steelworkers alone, and that pension mis-selling pay-outs in 2018 hit a whopping £40 million—double the figure for 2017. This is a national issue across many sectors, and it is up to the FCA and the Government to stand up and stick by workers and pensioners who have been wrongly advised, and do all they can to improve regulation and legislation for future generations. I look forward to working with those in this room on all of those challenges, and I thank hon. Members for their attention.

9.55 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on securing this important debate. I should also declare that I have a steel plant in my own constituency, although it is not as badly affected as those in Port Talbot.

About 40,000 members of the British Steel pension scheme, the Tata Steel retirement fund, had the choice to trade their guaranteed pensions for a cash lump sum and transfer to a riskier plan as the scheme was restructured. To date, there have been about 8,000 transfers worth about £2.8 billion. Last year, as transfers from the British Steel scheme ramped up, the Financial Conduct Authority intervened to halt the activities of advice firms because of concerns that dubious advisers, incentivised by commissions and high fees, were descending on steel towns, especially Port Talbot in Wales, and enticing BSPS members to transfer their pensions.

It is extremely alarming that we now know the role advisers played in persuading steel workers to move their savings into riskier schemes. To call them cowboys would be an insult to cowboys. Financial advisers persuaded hundreds of steelworkers to give up their guaranteed pensions before the FCA halted their activity, concerned that it was mis-selling. The Work and Pensions Committee report into the BPS described how:

“Many BPS members were shamelessly bamboozled into signing up to ongoing adviser fees and unsuitable funds characterised by high investment risk, high management charges and punitive exit fees.”

It is clear that there was widespread mis-selling to members of the BPS. The FCA found from a sample of those members that nearly half had been given unsuitable advice or advice that was unclear.

In its findings, the review into those pensions transfers recommended that pension scheme trustees should compile a list of recommended advisers for pensions transfers. Indeed, it seems strange that that is not already the case. I know that unions such as Community and Unite have done their best, but it is a complicated set of circumstances in which people have been shamelessly robbed of their pension funds. It is right that scheme members should not be left out in the wilderness when it comes to advice on what to do with their retirement savings. There must be more clarity for scheme members, so that they are not lured in by dodgy and self-interested firms, as illustrated by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock).

The Scottish National party is keen to support steel communities across Scotland. First and foremost, workers must be put at the heart of solutions to put pension funds on a sustainable footing. The SNP Scottish Government took urgent action to ensure that steel plants were attractive to potential investors, to save workers from losing out. An investment of almost £200,000 was made by the Scottish Government to keep key workers on standby to safeguard full manufacturing capability, ensuring that plants could get back up and running as quickly as possible. The Dalzell works in my Motherwell and Wishaw constituency was the prime beneficiary of that policy, which also helped to safeguard Clydebridge works in the neighbouring constituency of Rutherglen and Hamilton West.

When the UK Government were dealing with the matter of the British Steel pension scheme, my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) expressed concern to the then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills that workplace pensions and incentives to save must not be undermined by any deal. In Parliament, my SNP colleagues and I have expressed solidarity with the workers at those plants, and I must thank the all-party parliamentary group on steel and metal related industries, which has done outstanding work in that regard as well. Hon. Members should rest assured that we will continue to press the UK Government to take meaningful action on issues that threaten the viability of industrial premises across the UK and their workers. This entire episode reaffirms the need for an independent pensions and savings commission to put the pensions landscape on a sustainable footing.

People have a right to know and understand their pension savings. At the moment, the UK Government's extremely complicated pensions and savings landscape—made all the more confusing through the introduction of pension freedoms and vehicles such as lifetime ISAs—is making it more likely that consumers will make the wrong choices for their circumstances.

The BPS members were in an extremely difficult and vulnerable situation that was exploited by greedy firms to the detriment of normal working people, who deserve the retirement that was promised to them. I can speak personally of the difficulties of realising that the pension being looked forward to will not materialise, because it happened in my husband's case. We were not in anything like extreme circumstances, but it was still a shock to us that the future we had been promised and were looking forward to did not happen.

The SNP has long called for the establishment of an independent pensions commission to ensure that employees' savings are protected and a more progressive approach to fairer savings is considered as we move to a period

where defined benefit schemes are becoming a thing of the past. Now that the UK Government are battling with the chaos caused by the Brexit vote, the need for such an independent commission is more important than ever. This also highlights that the Government's initiatives to improve consumer support and pensions are playing catch-up. More action must be taken urgently.

The Government have dragged their heels on the introduction of the pension dashboard, but there is absolutely no reason why this needs to be dragged out. It certainly should not be watered down. Consumers need a unified dashboard that includes their state and private pensions. The SNP was broadly supportive of the creation of a new single financial guidance and claims body that would merge independent financial and pensions advice bodies, and the Minister should update the House on the progress of the establishment of this body. Is it up and running? How can it be used to ensure that people in vulnerable circumstances, such as BSPS members, can be armed with the facts to be able to make the right choices for their retirement?

I again congratulate the hon. Members for Blaenau Gwent and for Aberavon on their outstanding work in this field. In the past, I have had dealings with the Financial Conduct Authority on pensions matters and with the financial ombudsman and have found them to be reactive, dilatory and unable and uncertain about how they can best help constituents who have been tricked and duped in terrible circumstances. The idea that men, and it is nearly always men, who worked in a hard and sometimes dangerous job should end up being duped by financial advisers—to their complete detriment—and unable to look their families in the eye and say, “I made a mistake, I am sorry, but nothing can be done”, is unacceptable to everyone in this place.

10.3 am

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on securing the debate. I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnoek), who has played a major role in the drive for justice for those who were cheated on their pensions, the work of the APPG and the co-operation of colleagues from the SNP. I also welcome to her first Westminster Hall debate the newly elected Member for Newport West, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), who will, I know, be a strong champion of the people of Newport West.

A good pension is about security and dignity in retirement. The people of Britain deserve nothing but security and dignity in retirement. People work hard, build our country and, when they come towards retirement, plan ahead for the holiday they had always dreamed of, or to help their kids to be able to buy their own home. There can be nothing more painful than to be cheated out of what they have worked for all their lives.

I sometimes say I have been around since Churchill was a boy. I remember the era back in the 1970s and 1980s, when half the population of Britain was in good final salary DB schemes. We have made some progress—for example, the battle on auto-enrolment that we fought and won when Labour was in power, and which I welcome being carried forward by this Government—but to be frank, there has been a depressing direction of

travel for good final salary schemes. There have been too many scandals, but none more scandalous than that of British Steel, and that is emblematic of the problem we face with the regulation of DB pension schemes in the UK.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent stated, when a deal was struck to keep Tata afloat, members belonging to the £15 billion British Steel pension fund were given the option to shift their assured benefits to the Pension Protection Fund, to join a new retirement scheme backed by Tata, or to transfer to personal pension funds. That led to what was called a “feeding frenzy” at the site in Port Talbot, as dodgy introducers preyed on workers who were more than likely confused about the position of their pension, and who may not have had the financial support or education needed to make such an important decision. Some advice was available, but often it was simply not good enough, or it was technical and unintelligible. Those rogues, those introducers, should be utterly ashamed of themselves. They bought meals for workers in local pubs, and convinced them to transfer their pensions into totally unsuitable schemes. Some people could have lost up to six figures from their pension total.

The Financial Conduct Authority has been probing concerns that pension changes that involve 130,000 members of the Tata retirement fund appear to have been affected. A study of the 8,000 people who transferred their pension demonstrated that 58% received advice that was simply not suitable, and the Pensions Regulator calculated that in 2017, the average loss was £94,000.

I will never forget the heartbreaking story that I was told by the chief executive of the Pensions Advisory Service during the passage of the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill that introduced the Single Financial Guidance Body. The Pensions Advisory Service set up an advice facility on site, and one of the first people to come in was a big burly steelworker and shift supervisor. He sat down and burst into tears. It turned out that he had been duped by one of those introducers, and it had cost him tens of thousands of pounds. The main reason for his grief, however, was not what he had suffered and would endure for the rest of his life, but the fact that the 20 guys on his shift had all followed his lead. He said to the Pensions Advisory Service, “I’ll never, ever be able to forgive myself, because the mistake that I made has had catastrophic consequences for the people I’ve worked with for 10, 20 or 30 years”.

The British Steel case was central to our work during the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill, and I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friends the Members for Blaenau Gwent and for Aberavon, and many other Members, particularly from Wales, who played a noble role in strengthening the legislation to crack down on the outrageous. Real progress was made. Cold calling more generally was central to the debate on the Bill, and the ban on pension cold calling was a significant step in the right direction. However, we must now go further and introduce a ban on all cold calling—there were constructive discussions about that, and it would be helpful if the Minister would update us on the Government's thinking—and we must also ban the work of introducers. From January this year there has been an end to pension cold calling, but more needs to be done.

More generally, the introduction of the Single Financial Guidance Body is a welcome step towards greater financial education and security. It brings together the three previous

[Jack Dromey]

bodies, which all did good work, into a new, more effective body for the next stages. Crucially, it needs to be adequately resourced, not least because of the role that it will play in the oversight of the dashboard process, but it is welcome that it has been established.

Having said that, lessons need to be learned, and significant further progress must be made. On the learning of lessons, and the need for action, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, said of the Committee's findings earlier this year:

"British steelworkers were roundly failed by the official regulators meant to protect their life savings. They were given precious little to guide them through murky waters filled with scammers looking to snatch their pensions—scammers who had little to fear from the FCA's grossly inadequate action at the time",

which I think it now acknowledges. The right hon. Gentleman continued:

"Now it seems they are being sold short again on what even the FCA calls 'rightly' deserved compensation. The FCA has ridden to their defence and urged the FSCS to be more generous, but the FSCS is clinging to rules the FCA says needn't apply."

That is a powerful indictment of what happened, and a call for further action to be taken. That is essential because—I say this with some sadness—British Steel is not the only outrageous case of pension mishandling. We have seen too many other scandals, most notably BHS and Philip Green, who ought to be utterly ashamed of the way he has conducted himself over the years, and what happened with the collapse of Carillion, which I will never forget.

In my constituency, we had a first-class apprentice training centre that was operated by Carillion and that had 60 apprentices going through it at any one time. When Carillion collapsed on the Monday, they were told, "Don't worry. You'll be okay." On the Tuesday, they all got called in and sent home at lunch time—a number of them in tears. One young man, who had suffered from autism but whose life had been moving forward in the right direction, was sobbing uncontrollably and saying, "What am I going to tell my mum?"

On the pensions issue, Carillion has been centre stage in our discussions, including with the Government, about the further steps that need to be taken. Some of the proposals in the DB White Paper are welcome, such as stronger criminal sanctions for directors neglecting pension schemes—although I will come on to the fact that the possibility of criminal action is there in the here and now—stronger powers for TPR, and clearer standards on scheme funding.

Stephen Kinnock: On the issue of further action, particularly regarding legislation, is it not vital that the Government recognise the huge risk in divesting pensions? If people are not defaulted into the new scheme that is being set up, and it is left completely open to them, there is a real risk that they will be easy prey for unscrupulous financial advisers. Should the Government not bring forward a statutory instrument that makes it the default to go into a new scheme, rather than to go into the Pension Protection Fund? That is particularly important when all the actuarial advice is that it would be best for the vast majority of those pensioners to have gone into the new scheme and that they should have just been defaulted into it. That can be done by statutory instrument.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. In the debate over the last 12 or 18 months, we have called that the progressive default option. There is no question but that it has enormous merits and it would be helpful if the Minister were to comment on it in his response.

The experience with Carillion pointed to more general problems that started with the Government's lamentable non-intervention. Despite the fact that the company was getting into greater and greater difficulty, and despite repeated profit warnings, they continued to let contracts to Carillion. The regulators were aware of the risks at a relatively early stage, but they did not use the full extent of their powers to avoid unnecessary burdens on business. I kid you not. I quote from what was said at the time.

The board, which failed in its duties to workers and pension scheme members, continued to pay out large salaries, bonuses and dividends, but did not pay into the pension deficit. The trustees did not alert regulators to the extent of the problems early enough. Asset managers continued voting through large pay packages despite profit warnings, and the auditors did not spot the signs of trouble early enough. There is a raft of problems associated with the scandals that have befallen too many workers in our economy. The lessons from Carillion in terms of the need for action more generally are powerful indeed.

At the next stage it is vital that the regulators act to make sure that such events never happen again. They need to become more people-focused, ensuring that workers' pensions are protected at all costs. Rogues in the industry must be sought out and punished, ensuring that they never work in the industry again, and the law needs to be strengthened. To that end, there have been constructive discussions with the Government on presenting a Bill as soon as possible to introduce the stronger powers contained in the DB White Paper to go after rogues. Perhaps the Minister will comment on where that legislation is. It is important for two other reasons, including the introduction of the pensions dashboard—for example, the compulsion on providers to provide the necessary information to the dashboard—and the collective defined contribution pension scheme that has been agreed between Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union.

There are welcome measures on pensions that can and should be taken where there is a degree of consensus, even if we argue that the Government should go significantly further. The sooner they are introduced into legislation, the better.

In conclusion, this is little comfort to the workers of British Steel or those in Carillion, but the tragedy that befell them was at the centre of the drive for changing and strengthening the law last year. It is at least something of a legacy, even if it is cold comfort to them. At the heart of it were MPs such as my hon. Friends the Members for Blaenau Gwent and for Aberavon, who played a major role in highlighting the scandal and demanding that action be taken.

At the next stages, I stress again that it is important that lessons are learnt by all those I have referred to and that the law is strengthened. I will finish by referring to something that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent said, and he was absolutely right. Is it necessary to change the law in the ways that I have argued for? Yes, without hesitation, but there are powers that exist now in criminal law, and those powers should be used.

I know the workers of Port Talbot would say that those evil men and women who cheated them on their pensions need to be investigated, tracked down and put in the dock. An unmistakable message must be sent: if you rob workers of their pension scheme, you are an utter disgrace and, will end up in the dock, and, in extreme cases, in prison.

10.18 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this important debate. I know he has engaged extensively and constructively with the Financial Conduct Authority on these matters over the past year. I was pleased to meet him in February to discuss how we can avoid a repeat of the unfortunate circumstances that occurred in the British Steel pensions scheme case. I am aware of the extensive work he has undertaken with the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and others from south Wales, and I know that the FCA has valued immensely that interaction to try to improve communications and other aspects raised in the debate this morning.

Many issues have been raised in the debate, and I will seek to respond to them all—particularly the importance of a well-functioning financial advice market. I have listened carefully to all those who have made observations about the aspects of that that are not functioning well.

I will refer to the lessons that have been learned specifically in the British Steel pensions case; the actions the FCA has taken to address unsuitable pensions transfer advice; the protections in place for consumers; and the issue of so-called phoenix firms—an outrageous situation where individuals seek to leave behind responsibility for a previous, failed enterprise, recreate a new enterprise and therefore absolve themselves of responsibility.

I am here as the Minister responsible for financial services. I note the questions that have been raised by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) concerning the status and other aspects of the pensions Bill. I was in front of the Work and Pensions Committee last week with my colleague, the Minister for Pensions, so I have some observations on that, but he has lead responsibility in that area, so I shall seek to secure a response from him.

As the Minister responsible for financial services, I am committed to ensuring that a well-functioning financial advice market exists to support people to make the right decisions for them and their families. In 2015, as has been mentioned, the Treasury and the FCA launched the financial advice market review, with the goal of improving the accessibility and affordability of financial advice. The Government and the FCA have now implemented all 28 recommendations from that review and will be reviewing the advice market again over 2019 to monitor progress and report back next year.

The Government have also made financial advice mandatory for people considering a defined-benefit pension transfer where the value of the pension is over £30,000. That threshold is purposely low, given the dire consequences of taking poor advice and making unwise decisions—as has been said in relation to a number of cases this morning. That is to ensure that people consider the fact that they may lose guaranteed income in retirement and are aware of all the options available before they make such a complex decision.

Turning to British Steel, although most financial advisers offer sound advice, unfortunately there are cases where the advice people receive is not right for them. The British Steel case was one such instance and resulted from a unique set of complex circumstances. A minority of advisers were responsible for giving unsuitable advice, which resulted in losses for scheme members. The restructure of the British Steel pension scheme occurred at a time when there was considerable concern over the future of Tata Steel, and members were understandably worried about whether they were about to lose their jobs and pensions. Several public bodies were involved in supporting scheme members to decide what to do with their British Steel pension, and it would be helpful to outline their different roles, because that will bring clarity to where the issues lie and how we can address them.

The Pensions Regulator is responsible for negotiating and agreeing arrangements where an employer is unable to continue to support a defined-benefit scheme, as was the case for Tata Steel and the British Steel pension scheme. That includes guidance and oversight of the trustees and scheme administrators. As such, the Pensions Regulator was also responsible for the options available to BPS members, the communications sent by the trustees and the deadlines for decisions to be made.

The FCA is responsible for the regulation of the financial advice market. Financial advice firms must be authorised by the FCA before they are permitted to provide advice, including on pension transfers, and advisers are required to provide financial advice that is suitable for the individual's personal circumstances.

The Pensions Advisory Service was an independent service offering free-to-consumer guidance on pension matters. As has been mentioned, it has recently been merged with Pension Wise and the Money Advice Service to create a new single financial guidance body, which is now known as the Money and Pensions Service. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington asked from the Opposition Front Bench about the status of that body. The chief executive is now in place, and work is going on in this financial year to set up the processes for bringing those three entities together. There will be a series of announcements over the coming months about their intentions, but the body will operationalise in the course of the coming financial year.

As to the lessons learned from the experience in south Wales with the British Steel scheme, the independent Rookes review, which considered the communication exercise that supported members of British Steel to take decisions on their pension, reported in January. It noted that there are important lessons for organisations to learn to prevent such a case from happening again. There are, I think, 18 recommendations, and they include earlier intervention and intelligence sharing between the regulators and the Money and Pensions Service; improved support for members considering cash transfers out of defined-benefit schemes; improved guidance for trustees facing restructuring and other major changes; and improved message content clarity and channels.

The Pensions Regulator, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Money and Pensions Service have publicly committed to addressing the review's remaining recommendations. They have agreed a joint protocol to work together to ensure that consumers are appropriately protected. It includes ensuring that support and

[*John Glen*]

communications are in place for members of defined-benefit pension schemes, ahead of any restructures and consultations—something manifestly different from what happened in the regrettable case that we are considering. Another aim of the protocol is that there should be better co-ordination of the involvement of different public bodies through early intervention, expedited approval processes and improved information sharing. The bodies have also developed branded written materials for trustees, to ensure that there are better communications with pension scheme members, including letters to alert them to the risks of transferring out of DB pension schemes, and the giving of practical information.

I will now talk about action on unsuitable pensions transfer advice, because the British Steel case has also raised many questions about quality.

Stephen Kinnock: The Minister has set out some of the structural and institutional issues and the lessons to be learned, but does he agree that when 8,000 members transfer out there is clearly a problem that needs to be addressed at source? Flagging up risks is all very well, but this is a case of shutting the door after the horse has bolted. We need a system that prevents such mass migration out, because once those kinds of numbers are involved it is highly likely that people will be going against actuarial advice that is in their best interests.

John Glen: I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's interventions, and he is right to say that 6.6% of the 122,000 individuals who had those pensions did transfer out, and that, in general, the default option would not be to transfer out of a DB scheme. There is work going on to develop pathways. I am not clear, given that it is not my direct area of responsibility, about the status of that work. I think, however, that there is a challenge, in the context of the policy on freedoms that is now well under way, about how to reconcile that freedom with making the decisions in question. Perhaps I might pivot over to consider the DC schemes. I think what is happening is that many people decide to take the 25% tax-free lump sum and then do not necessarily make appropriate, or the best, decisions on the remainder of that pot of money. Work is being done on that, but with respect to the specificity of the default option, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a definitive response now.

I think we are moving to a point where there will be default pathways that people will need to be advised on when they take advice. I think that is probably a sensible compromise that deals with the fact that, in some instances, not coming out of the DB scheme would not be the right thing to do. The hon. Gentleman will agree about that, although he is also perfectly correct to say that, generally, not coming out would be the right thing to do. There is work to be done, but I think progress is being made, and I acknowledge the sensible point he has raised.

Nick Smith: I want to focus on what the Minister calls the 6%—perhaps nearly 8,000 people—who may have been badly advised in this case. What is he going to do to get the FCA to up its game, contact those people and help them, in case they have been badly advised?

John Glen: Following our meeting, I undertook to speak to Andrew Bailey, the chief executive. We are due to meet every few months, and our next meeting

is imminent. I will speak to him about that. A number of live investigations are under way; I do not have investigative power myself, but I will take a close interest in those investigations. Individual companies—I will not name them—are being actively investigated now, and I expect the FCA to make announcements and recommendations consequent to those investigations imminently. I am not privy to the detail, but I am taking a close interest and will be speaking to the chief executive, because I realise that time is pressing on. This morning we have heard vivid accounts of individuals and families ruined by these decisions, and I take the matter seriously.

To get back to my script, the FCA leads on financial advice and has considerable power to act against firms and individuals who provide negligent advice. To be clear: the FCA can impose a financial penalty on a firm, require the firm to pay redress to its customers, restrict the firm's permissions, or prohibit individuals from operating in financial services. The FCA can bring criminal prosecutions. I hear the enthusiasm for that action being taken, and I think the FCA hears it too, but it works closely with other organisations to support criminal prosecutions. Both the Government and the FCA are targeting their attention on the effective regulation of financial services and wider work to tackle scams, including the recent implementation of a ban on pensions cold calling.

Jack Dromey: That is helpful, but in the case of British Steel, I think it would send absolutely the right message to the workers concerned if the Minister said today that a sense of urgency is needed on the part of the FCA and the South Wales police about investigating potential criminal wrongdoing and taking action. The workers back at the plant would welcome that.

John Glen: I am happy to respond to that intervention by saying that it is absolutely imperative that the FCA works with all bodies to hold those individuals to account and to take the appropriate action in the light of the evidence presented to it. This is urgent; the individuals who have suffered this experience expect that of the FCA, and I believe the FCA is keenly aware of that.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent talked about the regional presence of the FCA. It has more than 3,000 employees and runs an annual programme of regional supervisory workshops under its "Live and local" banner, in which it educates firms and gathers intelligence from across the country. That has included recent workshops on DB pension transfers. Although the FCA does not have a series of regional offices, there is a clear expectation on the part of the Government and the FCA itself that it will go out into communities across the country, to ensure it has a presence among the 35,000 IFAs that operate.

The regulator is also undertaking further work on the pensions transfer advice market. The FCA is analysing responses to a recent data request from firms that undertake pensions transfer advice and is planning a programme of work, which is likely to include further engagement with stakeholders, targeted education for firms involved in providing pension transfer advice, and assessment of those firms significantly involved in the provision of DB transfer advice. The FCA has already announced a requirement for all pension transfer specialists to obtain the same qualifications as fully regulated investment advisers, alongside their existing qualifications,

by October 2020. In relation to the BSPS, the FCA intervened to stop 11 firms from providing pensions transfer advice, and several firms are still under investigation.

It is important to ensure that consumers are protected from poor-quality and unsuitable advice, and there are proper mechanisms for redress when they receive poor advice. The first port of call for consumers to seek compensation is to approach the firm itself. If they cannot resolve the issue, consumers can take their complaint to the Financial Ombudsman Service. The FOS is a free, independent service that provides an alternative to the courts. The maximum award it can recommend was increased at the beginning of this month from £150,000 to £350,000 per individual. If firms go into liquidation and cannot provide compensation to individuals, a second tier of protection is open through the financial services compensation scheme. The FSCS is mainly funded by an annual levy on the financial services industry. Since its founding, the FSCS has helped millions of people and paid billions of pounds in compensation.

It is important to note that in the British Steel case, only a very small minority of former steelworkers who have taken their claims through the FOS and the FSCS have not been fully compensated. That group were all clients of one firm, and the Government's decision to make financial advice mandatory for those seeking to transfer their DB pension has therefore guaranteed a crucial layer of consumer protection to those individuals.

“Phoenixing”—firms or individuals seeking to avoid liabilities arising from poor investment advice by re-emerging as a different legal entity—can leave consumers and taxpayers out of pocket and tarnish the reputation of the industry. The FCA has a range of tools to identify and act against firms or individuals who try to avoid responsibility in that way. Those seeking to liquidate firms must provide information about outstanding complaints, and the assets of collapsed firms cannot be sold on or passed back to former directors without the prior consent of the regulator. The FCA has already used those powers to prevent several individuals and businesses from avoiding their liabilities, and other cases are under investigation. This has caused some individuals to withdraw their applications, knowing full well that they will not get through. Although I acknowledge that this will not give absolute comfort to those who have suffered, I believe that we now have in place a regime that will prevent the practice in future.

Stephen Kinnock: On the issue of compensation, phoenixing and rogue financial advisers' ability to just shut up shop and walk away, surely there is also a question of insurance. In our recent meeting with the FCA, which I found absolutely extraordinary, it was made clear to us that there appears to be no mandatory level of insurance that financial advisers must take out so that they can be held to account and insurance pay-outs can be made. My understanding is that, as soon as these advisers see the writing on the wall and know that people will come after them for compensation, they shut down, and there is no backstop—perhaps safety net is a better term—so that people who have been ripped off can go after them through an insurance process. Does not that extraordinary situation require a policy and legislative shift so that the FCA has a chance of doing its job in this area?

John Glen: I have been trying to find the note that one of my officials kindly sent me on the quantum of insurance. My understanding is that FCA-authorized

and regulated firms must have insurance in place; if they do not, the FCA has it in its armoury to de-authorise. I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman, and his point seemed to be on the amount of that insurance. I am happy to take that matter away and consider it. On the practice of phoenixing, I am given to understand that the FCA has done a significant amount of work in that area. It launched a programme of work in April 2018 to strengthen authorisations, and I have given some of the details. I do not want to waffle further on this point, but I will give consideration to the amount and level of insurance required. The hon. Gentleman has discussed the matter with the FCA; I will do so as well and write to him. If it is not fit for purpose, it is not fit.

I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent for bringing to the House this debate on a very important topic. I was pleased to hear that he is committed to supporting the communications work with the FCA to raise awareness among former BSPS members of their rights to complain and to seek justice. The Government, regulators and other organisations are strongly committed to monitoring the market for financial advice and defined-benefit pension schemes, and to taking decisive action to ensure that these events cannot be repeated. I recognise that Ministers often say that at this point, but I have listened sincerely and carefully to the points that have been raised.

A lot can be done as a consequence of the excellent work of the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, and through my interaction with the FCA. I accept that there have been some differences of opinion in the Chamber this morning regarding the amount that can be done by regulatory intervention and legislative action. However, I will do all I can to ensure that we exhaust reasonable opportunities for the FCA to tighten up in all these areas. The example given by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington of an individual who inadvertently, unwittingly and tragically led his 20 colleagues to make certain decisions, and the multiplier effect of those, was heartbreaking, and one that the Government need to respond to. I thank Members for the opportunity to respond to this morning's debate.

10.41 am

Nick Smith: Thank you, Mr Howarth for chairing what has been a productive debate on an important issue. There have been some strong contributions about some of the key problems that steel pensioners have had to work through in the last 18 months or so. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) spoke movingly about the human impact on his constituents, who were at the epicentre of these problems. I have seen the impact too, and it has been heartbreaking.

My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), emphasised the importance of looking at the possibilities for criminal proceedings. I strongly endorse that point, which needs to be taken on urgently by the South Wales police or the FCA.

Other contributors spoke clearly about these serious issues, and about what needs to be done to help in the future. It is clear that a lot of things went badly wrong, and hard-working people found their life savings put at risk. The problems that have been highlighted today need to be addressed as a matter of urgency so that we

[Nick Smith]

do everything we can to prevent this from happening again further down the line. I hope the Minister will see through the changes that are needed, given the problems that we have identified today. We will work with him to do that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered pension transfers and the British Steel pension scheme.

10.43 am

Sitting suspended.

Turkey: Treatment of Kurds

11 am

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the treatment of Kurds in Turkey.

Thank you, Mr Howarth, for allowing me to speak on this matter. As a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Kurds in Turkey, I wanted to secure this debate to highlight what I believe is a worsening situation for Kurds in Turkey.

On 31 March, my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and I were meant to travel to Turkey to meet Leyla Güven and observe the local elections taking place in Turkey. Unfortunately, the Government announced extra sitting days due to Brexit—something that I suspect even the Government could not help at that time—and we had to cancel the trip. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate and I did travel down to Newport to meet Imam Sis. Imam is a brave Kurdish activist from Newport who, 114 days ago, embarked on an indefinite hunger strike. Two weeks ago, when we met him, the hunger strike was taking its toll, but although his body was giving way, his determination in the cause of Kurdish freedom was not.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): As my hon. Friend said, I visited Imam Sis in Newport with him, and what struck me most was Imam's plea for the world not to look on in silence at the human rights abuses against the Kurds in Turkey. Deciding to go on an indefinite hunger strike for one's political cause is one of the hardest decisions and most drastic peaceful political actions that one can take, so does my hon. Friend agree that this Parliament and this Government must not stay silent about human rights abuses against Kurds while British citizens are risking their lives for the Kurdish political cause?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree that we must speak up, and I hope that we will get good responses from the Front Bench later.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on initiating the debate. It is good to see this issue being discussed in this Chamber. I support the Kurds and their right to self-determination—their right to be a nation and form their own Government. Alongside that, we have Turkey, which is an abuser of human rights and a suppressor of civil rights. Religious and ethnic groups are having their beliefs restricted; new churches are being prevented from being built. Is it not time that the free world, the west, the Minister, this Government and we ourselves stood alongside the Kurds and backed their wish for democracy and freedom—indeed, for liberty itself?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. Of course, historically, Britain was part of drawing the lines on maps that exterminated a Kurdish nation. We therefore have a responsibility to ensure that we are adding our voice in support of correcting an historical wrong in terms of the map, but also recognising the role that the Kurds have played in allying with us in numerous battles and particularly the latest one, against ISIS.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and I would like to echo the comment that he has just made. It is a fact that the west and the wider world have let down the Kurdish people, particularly after the first world war and again when we have seen them help the rest of the world—most recently in Syria against ISIS. We are in danger of once again turning our backs on the Kurds, but that must not happen.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. I should of course mention that my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) is the local Member for Imam Sis. She has been an advocate for his struggle, but cannot be here today because of the death of her agent last week; she is at his funeral. She is following this debate with great interest.

When I was with Imam, I asked him to write down the key demands that he wanted to be raised in Parliament, so I am here today to put Imam's voice in *Hansard* as well as to get a response. He wrote to me, saying:

"The hunger strikers are demanding that Turkey ends the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan. Namely, they are demanding that Öcalan be returned access to his lawyers and family. In not doing this Turkey is breaking international law and its own laws. The hunger strikers are also asking that the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture re-open its investigation into the conditions on İmralı Island where Öcalan is being held."

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I am sure he will agree that we have noticed a pattern with Turkey: when there is international attention, Abdullah Öcalan gets something, such as a brief meeting with, say, his lawyer or his brother; then the attention of the world retreats and nothing further happens. It is essential that we keep the pressure on and that we call on the Government to ensure that the response of the Turkish Government is not just a superficial and tokenistic one.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. Since 2015, little if any access has been granted to Abdullah Öcalan, and it is only because some of the hunger strikes and campaigning that brief interventions have been allowed for relatives to make sure that he is still alive. He has been allowed no access to the external world and his lawyer has had no access in that time.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman, like me, praise the trade union movement in the UK for highlighting this issue as part of the Freedom for Öcalan campaign? Is he, like me, concerned that 700 appeals have been launched on behalf of Mr Öcalan but that, as he has said, lawyers are not getting access to him?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree; this last year just gone, the Durham Miners' Gala had an international theme of Freedom for Öcalan. Like many other struggles that we have had in the past, it shows that the trade union movement is stepping up to fight for what is just and right.

For the benefit of those watching proceedings who may not be aware of Abdullah Öcalan, he is the Kurdish leader and political philosopher who is currently imprisoned in Turkey. Last Thursday was his 70th birthday, but for 20 years of his life he has been held in prison by the Turkish authorities. Öcalan was abducted in February 1999 from Nairobi, Kenya, where he was in exile, in an

international clandestine operation involving Turkish intelligence agencies. He was transported to the island prison, where he has been kept in harsh solitary confinement. He has been forbidden to contact his lawyer since 2011—I met his lawyer a month ago—and he has only been granted access to anyone twice since 2015. The conditions in which he is held violate not only Turkish law, but the European convention on human rights, which Turkey is obliged to follow as a member of the Council of Europe.

To protest these unlawful conditions, the then imprisoned MP for the HDP, the People's Democratic Party, Leyla Güven, began an indefinite hunger strike on 7 November. Leyla was imprisoned by the Turkish authorities following her critical remark on the Government's bombing of Afrin in northern Syria, which she rightly described with detestation. She was a sitting MP, thrown in prison for doing her job and holding the Government to account. She was released 80 days later, but now, after almost 140 days, she is nearing death, suffering from nausea, fever, severe headaches, insomnia and unstable blood pressure. We have seen a set of elections in Turkey that are beyond what anyone could call fair and free, particularly in some of the Kurdish regions.

Leyla in Turkey and Imam here in the UK are not alone in their hunger strike. Since the end of last year, they have been joined by 8,000 political prisoners from across Turkey, and numerous activists in Europe, north America, the middle east have all joined Ms Güven in declaring indefinite hunger strikes. Many hunger strikers are now suffering from serious health problems, but refuse medical treatment until the isolation of Öcalan is lifted.

We are joined in the Public Gallery by three hunger strikers who are based here in London. If they will excuse my pronunciation—I will probably get it wrong—they are Ali Poyraz, Nahide Zengin, and Mehmet Sait Yılmaz, who are on their 27th day of hunger strike. It is awful to find oneself in the position where that is the only recourse to political voice, but I welcome them to Parliament today and I know that many MPs in this place, while not joining them in their methods, will be sympathetic and support their demands.

The human rights situation in Turkey has been progressively deteriorating since the breakdown of talks for the peaceful resolution of the decades-long conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish state in 2015, at which point the Turkish state began to engage in a policy of brutal oppression of the Kurdish population, imposing harsh 24-hour curfews in the south-eastern Kurdish region and committing countless human rights abuses—all this after Öcalan had spurned violence in favour of peaceful, political resolution. In Britain, we know that converting a violent protest to a peaceful one is not an easy road; it requires good faith and perseverance on all sides. The fact is that Turkey's continued repression of Öcalan and the Kurds destroys any potential for a peaceful resolution for them and Turkey as a whole.

The situation was greatly exacerbated by the state of emergency that followed the failed coup in 2016, under which political opposition and trade union activity has largely been banned, and democratically elected politicians, Members of Parliament and members of the judiciary have been removed from office on the grounds of suspected affiliation to opposition activity. They have all been replaced with President Erdoğan's AKP puppets.

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture has visited the notorious island where Öcalan is held, İmralı, and other political prisoners seven times since 1999. Very few of the improvements that it has called for have ever been implemented. The CPT's last visit to the island was in 2016, and Turkey gave permission for the publication of its report only in 2018, two years later. The hunger strikers are demanding that the CPT be allowed to revisit İmralı island prison immediately and investigate the conditions of the prisoners there, to see if any of the improvements have been made.

I have been disappointed by the reaction to the growing concern. In January, the Council of Europe passed a resolution expressing concern about the human rights situation in Turkey and the condition of the hunger strikers, as well as calling Turkey to authorise the immediate publication of the CPT's reports. However, the resolution has been insufficient in putting pressure on Turkey to change its ways. The hunger strikers are calling for all possible pressure to be put on Turkey to end the isolation of Öcalan before the situation escalates and there are mass casualties.

What recent discussions has the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had—I am aware that the Minister covering for this debate is not the Minister for the middle east—with counterparts in Turkey on the treatment of Kurdish prisoners in Turkey and in particular on the conditions on İmralı island. Will he seek assurances from the Turkish authorities that Öcalan will be granted access to his lawyer in compliance with Turkish and international law? Will he, as a matter of urgency, seek to have the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture reopen its investigation into İmralı island? Will the Government support the Welsh Assembly's referral to the CPT on this matter, so that it has the backing of the whole of the British state? Will we ensure that our member of the CPT raises this issue in those committee meetings? Turkey is a NATO ally, but we must not allow a friendship to stop us demanding fair and just treatment of all citizens.

In Northern Ireland and other parts of the world, we have seen that we achieve lasting peace only if political leaders on all sides are given legitimacy, respect and a seat at the table to forge peace. The British Government must stand with the Kurdish people—as I have mentioned, we have an historic duty, as well as a current humanitarian and moral duty to do so—to seek the peace that they desperately deserve.

11.14 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): May I first say how grateful I am to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for securing the debate, and to other hon. Members for their contributions? The Minister for Europe and the Americas, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), cannot be here today and sends his apologies. The fact that I am speaking about Turkey is not a further extension of my duties, but it is a great pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. I will try to respond to all the points that have been raised; if I fail to do so, I hope that the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown will forgive me, and I will respond in writing afterwards.

We are obviously aware of Imam Sis's hunger strike in protest at the conditions in which Abdullah Öcalan is being held and related issues. I will go into more detail about the hunger strike later, because it has been raised by a number of hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown also mentioned election outcomes. We note the preliminary conclusions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, which monitored Turkey's local elections, including wins for the HDP in a number of major cities in the south-east. On the one hand, its conclusions welcome the impressive turnout of 84%, calling it a "sign of healthy democratic interest and awareness."

However, we also note the deep concerns that were raised about the fairness of the campaigning environment, particularly in relation to the media coverage. We will encourage the Turkish authorities to engage with the recommendations of the full report, which is due in July. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, recounts are ongoing in Istanbul, and the governing AKP has appealed to the Supreme Electoral Council for a full recount. We must of course await the decision of that council, which may adjudicate on the matter as soon as 13 April. Meanwhile, the CHP candidate for Ankara received his certificate of election from the council on Monday.

I will say a bit more about broader relations with Turkey. It was fair of the hon. Gentleman to recognise in his contribution that Turkey is a vital partner for the UK. Turkey is a long-term member of NATO; it sits on NATO's southern border, on the frontline of some of the most difficult challenges we face. We work together to counter terrorism, build our prosperity and pursue stability in our neighbourhood, recognising that a lot of these issues are now of global importance. We should also acknowledge that Turkey is hosting some 3.6 million Syrian refugees, at considerable cost.

Of the approximately 83 million Turkish citizens, some 15 million to 18 million are of Kurdish origin. They live in all parts of Turkey, from the traditional Kurdish heartlands of the south-east to the larger cities in the west, with perhaps 3 million in Istanbul alone. There are many Kurds in the Turkish diaspora, including here in the UK, where they make a positive contribution, not just to the UK economy but culturally. I know that the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), who is no longer in his place, recognises the importance of the Turkish diaspora to that part of north London.

It is important not to generalise when we talk about "the Kurds" or their plight. They are a diverse section of society, with a range of political affiliations, lifestyles and outlooks. As Members will be aware, there are also large Kurdish populations in Iraq, Iran and Syria, countries that are all of great strategic importance to the UK. Our approach to the issue of the Kurds in Turkey needs to reflect aspects of that wider context.

We should also not generalise when we talk about the treatment of Kurdish people in Turkey. I absolutely note the concerns that have been expressed in this debate about the policies of the current Turkish Government towards Kurds, and I will try to address some of the issues that have been raised. It is worth remembering that a great many people of Kurdish origin have voted for, and continue to vote for, the AKP Government.

Indeed, some have served in it—two of Turkey’s most recent Deputy Prime Ministers were of Kurdish origin. All Turks, regardless of their ethnicity or faith, enjoy the same rights under the Turkish constitution, and from 2003 onwards—especially following the 2009 Kurdish opening policy—the AKP did much to end the historical restrictions on the free expression of Kurdish identity in Turkey.

The Turkish Government have always said that their quarrel is not with the Kurds as a whole, but with the specific terrorist groups that threaten the Turkish state. I appreciate that this matter is open to some dispute, both within Turkey and among those in the UK who have an interest in Turkish issues. However, the Turkish state has been locked in a bitter conflict with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party—the PKK—since the 1980s. The PKK is a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK and throughout much of the world.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does the Minister recognise that the latest court ruling in Belgium about the PKK’s proscribed status in European law at least opens up a discussion about whether it is still an active terrorist group or has transitioned to more peaceful means?

Mark Field: I understand that. It is worth pointing out that the proscription of organisations is always quite fluid and constantly under review—I see that in my day-to-day brief as Minister for Asia and the Pacific, as well as in the middle east and north Africa.

That tragic conflict has resulted in an estimated 40,000 deaths and the displacement of millions of people in south-east Turkey. An end to that conflict is possible. Between 2013 and 2015, the Turkish Government and the PKK engaged in fruitful negotiations to end it, and a ceasefire was in place for much of that time. Sadly, that ceasefire broke down in July 2015. Since then, according to the International Crisis Group, more than 4,000 people have been killed. That includes more than 400 civilians and more than 1,000 members of the Turkish security forces. I say to hon. Members who have a strong interest in this matter, not least because of the diaspora in their constituencies, that the UK very much hopes that those negotiations can reopen to bring an end to the conflict and prevent further deaths. For that to happen, the PKK must end its campaign of terror, and we urge it to do so.

I note that there are Members from across the House in the Chamber today. There are two Members from Plaid Cymru: the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake)—I am sure I have mispronounced both constituencies.

Jim Shannon: You have been practising.

Mark Field: In fact, there are no other English Members here at all. We have the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) from Northern Ireland and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for the Scottish National party. All have raised the serious situation of the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Naturally, we condemn the PKK’s acts of violence, just as we condemn all forms of terrorism, but we also naturally expect Turkey to respect properly its international obligations regarding the treatments of all prisoners. We are aware that the Council of Europe’s Committee

for the Prevention of Torture reported on Mr Öcalan’s prison conditions as recently as March 2018. In January, British embassy officials discussed his case, as well as that of hunger-striking prisoners, with Turkish officials.

Hon. Members have raised the issue of hunger strikes by prisoners, including by members of the HDP. Although it is of course distressing to witness any hunger strike—we see evidence of them closer to home, in Newport and elsewhere—the decision to embark on one is a matter for the individual concerned. As I said, we expect Turkey to respect its international obligations with regard to prison conditions, including by ensuring access to appropriate medical treatment.

A number of HDP MPs have been arrested on the basis of their alleged links to the PKK. If those links are proven to be accurate, we urge the HDP to distance itself entirely from the PKK and any terrorist activity. However, we have registered our concern with the Turkish authorities about the very large number of relatively recent detentions, including that of the HDP leader, Selahattin Demirtaş. Our embassy in Ankara, alongside other diplomatic missions, has attempted to observe Mr Demirtaş’s trial hearings. Unfortunately, we have sometimes been prevented from doing so. We urge the Turkish authorities to allow diplomatic missions to observe such trials so that we can understand the evidence on which the charges are based.

Hon. Members raised concerns about the replacement of large numbers of HDP mayors in the south-east of Turkey with state-appointed trustees. President Erdoğan has suggested that the same measures may be taken following last month’s local elections. That decision was taken on the basis that those mayors and their municipalities were allegedly channelling funding and political support to the PKK. Again, if that is the case, we should condemn it unreservedly, but we also expect the Turkish state to undertake any legal processes against locally elected representatives fairly, transparently and with full respect for international law and the rule of law. That is vital not just for the long-term health of Turkish democracy, but increasingly for Turkey’s international reputation.

As hon. Members will know, in 2016 there was an attempt to overthrow the Turkish Government by force. Obviously, we are thankful that the attempt failed, but many innocent civilians were killed. I am proud that the UK Government stood alongside our Turkish allies on that night. The Minister for Europe and the Americas travelled to Turkey as soon as he could to show solidarity. I also accept that aspects of the trauma have allowed more space for other activity. However, the trauma of the attempted coup is still fresh in the Turkish consciousness.

Liz Saville Roberts: Does the Minister feel personally comfortable that the PKK is aligned with terrorist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda on the proscribed list?

Mark Field: As the right hon. Lady will be aware, obviously we have a proscription in place for good reason, but it is not a hit list of acceptability from one organisation to another. Until such time as the PKK denounces violence, it must recognise that it will be regarded as a proscribed organisation in many parts of the world. I would like to see those people who have been actively engaged denounce violence to ensure that they are no longer proscribed and can play a proper and full part in the democratic process. The list does not run

[Mark Field]

from A to Z according to some level of acceptability; an organisation is either proscribed or it is not. One might objectively sit back and think, “Certain organisations are more dangerous to our interests than others.” None the less, it is right that rules for proscription are in place.

The Turkish Government have a right and a responsibility to act against the perpetrators of any coup attempt and all who have committed or are planning terrorist acts. However, it is also vital that any and all measures taken are proportionate and in line with Turkey’s democratic principles and freely given human rights obligations. We shall continue to express our concern to Turkey where we believe that is not the case. This includes a number of individual cases, including that of a former Amnesty director, Taner Kılıç, who was released on bail last year. We look forward to the judicial reforms that Turkey’s reform action group is considering and hope they will make a genuine difference to other cases of concern, including those of the civil society patron, Osman Kavala.

We remain concerned at the sheer scale of the response, including the number of civil servants who have been summarily dismissed from their jobs, and especially the number of journalists who have been detained. We believe that a free press is an essential component of a healthy democracy, and I know that the UK’s championing of that will have support across the House with our Defend Media Freedom campaign in 2019, which will culminate in a conference in London on 10 and 11 July with our friends from Canada. In raising these issues, we will never forget the trauma of the coup attempt and the extraordinary security threats that Turkey continues to face on a day-to-day basis. We can see that just by looking at a map of the region.

To conclude, we shall continue to engage with Turkey and other countries that have significant and sizable Kurdish populations on all the issues that have been raised in this important debate. We shall continue to press for lasting solutions that are proportionate, democratic and lawful.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Legal Aid for Inquests

[MRS ANNE MAIN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered legal aid for inquests.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main. This debate is about a simple premise: who can access justice, and who cannot? Much to our shame, during inquests, too many people who have experienced appalling loss and suffering fall into the latter category. This debate is about deaths in state detention and custody, or where there is a public interest, and about how the families of those lost should be given adequate resources to find the truth. It is about a fair request for a non-intrusive, non-means-tested, automatic right to legal aid for legal representation for bereaved families. The charity Inquest claims that granting such a request will cost as little as £5 million, yet it will be invaluable to suffering families who need answers. The topic of legal aid for inquests has rightly moved up the political agenda, and I pay tribute to Inquest and other campaigners who have worked tirelessly to make that so.

A huge injustice sits at the very heart of our justice system. On the one hand, state bodies and representatives are equipped with access to unlimited funds and resources—the best experts and the best legal teams. On the other hand, vulnerable families in the midst of grief are forced to navigate a complex and alien application process that is provided with the bare minimum of support—indeed, most people will not even receive that.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Legal aid is currently means-tested, and even then it is for limited purposes. Once someone has overcome that hurdle they must then apply for exceptional case funding, which puts them at a massive disadvantage compared with the huge resources available to state bodies.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend gets to the heart of this debate. The process is far too complex, and those who apply for legal aid are forced to run up huge legal bills on their own, represent themselves in court or rely on the generosity of strangers to help raise the required funds. Often, people have to tackle complex legal processes that involve multiple interested persons and agencies. Among a host of other complicated legal matters, people must address issues such as access to and release of a body, post mortems, communication with investigation teams, securing evidence and criminal investigations. Most people do not have the legal knowledge to do those things, and many do not have the resources to help. I ask the Minister: is that fair?

We are talking about the death of a child in a mental health setting—a death as a result of neglectful state services—or the self-inflicted death of a prisoner. The families of those lost feel a deep sense of pain. This debate is about deaths in state detention and custody, or where there is a clear public interest element to finding out the truth—for example, the Grenfell tragedy, the disaster at Hillsborough, or the recent case of Molly Russell, who tragically took her own life, in part, her parents believe, because of distressing material related to depression and suicide that she was able easily to access on social media platforms.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Inquests once opened are sub judge, and even when adjourned they are under a strict interpretation of the resolution. Reference should not be made to legal inquests at all, but if something is linked to a specific case, as the hon. Lady just did, we must ask for details of that case not to be mentioned as they may well compromise the case currently under consideration. I urge all Members who wish to refer to that case to try to refrain from making specific references.

Stephanie Peacock: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh).

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on making a powerful speech, and I thank her for initiating the debate. The point she is making, and the examples she gives, are incredibly important. This debate is about death at the hands of the state, and the families who are trying to improve things so that such deaths never happen again, and the same mistakes—or criminal acts—are not made again. Given what we are talking about, does she agree that it is even more grossly unfair that the state's legal advice and representation should be so thoroughly weighted against the victims?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. All we are asking for is a level playing field. At the moment, the situation is totally disproportionate—a point I will come to.

The families of victims require help, accountability and answers, not only for themselves but, selflessly, to make sure that no other family goes through what they have. Instead, they are left by a callous Government to fight alone, their voices denied and excluded from the process. The scale of the discrepancy is a disgrace. In 2017 the Ministry of Justice spent £4.2 million on legal representation for the Prison Service in inquests involving deaths. In the same year the families of those who died were awarded just £92,000 in legal aid. I ask the Minister again: how can we in this place look the families of victims in the eyes and tell them that the current system is fair?

Where families are seeking through truth the knowledge that their loss was not in vain, the state seeks damage limitation through multiple expert legal teams defending the interests and reputations of corporate bodies. Such a staggering inequality of arms is a stain on our justice system. The testimony of those who have experienced it at first hand, kindly provided to me by Inquest, serves to prove it so. The process required to acquire legal aid is complicated, and the effects on those not fortunate enough to be successful are devastating. One father who lost his son in police custody said:

“The legal aid application process was incredibly stressful...the hoops we had to jump through to get funding to represent our son, who died as a result of one of the state agency's actions, remains a source of anger and hurt.”

Another, who lost his daughter in a care home after a long history of serious mental ill health, said:

“The time, effort, emotional energy, distress that the process has cost me in itself is very damaging. The cost of my legal representation to the State fades into insignificance compared to the cost the State has incurred in the aftermath of my daughter's death.”

Another who was unsuccessful in their legal aid application said:

“We had to do everything ourselves. We had no lawyer at the inquest. Those three weeks were the most terrifying thing I've

ever done in my life. I had to cross examine witnesses, it was absolutely terrifying, and they had lawyers. There needs to be a level playing field; a family member should never be put through that.”

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech with many good points. Does she agree that many families find the process intrusive as their own circumstances and financial situation are looked into? However, the state gets automatic legal representation. Does that not create exactly the uneven playing field that she refers to?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The system is simply unfair. Others have spoken of how the inquisitorial hearings are anything but. Instead, they are adversarial, law-drenched, distressing journeys, where already traumatised families are silenced and a well-oiled state machine sets about cementing a wall of denial. The families did not ask to be in such a situation. It was not something they sought or could prepare for. They are thrust unexpectedly into intense grief and pain and forced to go through further trauma.

One father spoke of how his family was forced to use money that they had been putting away for his daughter's wedding to pay for legal help following her death. Such stories are utterly devastating. The Government must do more to help. They cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the suffering of some of the most vulnerable in our justice system.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Government seem to rely on this point about the inquisitorial process, so one must ask why, if the family does not need representation, the various state bodies always need to be lawyered up. Indeed, there is something deeply cynical about the Government saying that in their final report—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman has applied to speak, but he cannot make his speech now. He has made his point and hopefully the hon. Lady will tackle it.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes an important point: the system is completely unfair. The Government and their agencies are given a blank cheque, whereas victims are not. It is not just the families of those lost and charities such as Inquest telling them that. Reports have proposed the necessity for changes for years, yet over the last few years the weight of evidence has mounted. Dame Angiolini in her report on deaths and serious incidents in police custody; the Right Rev. James Jones in his report on Hillsborough and the experiences of families; Lord Bach; two chief coroners; Baroness Corston; Lord Harris; the Joint Committee on Human Rights; the Independent Review of the Mental Health Act; and agencies, including the Independent Office for Police Conduct, have all outlined the need for change. Central to the reports of Dame Angiolini and the Right Rev. James Jones were the voices of families speaking about the impact of the inquest process on their wellbeing, much like the testimonies we have heard today.

In response, the Government launched a call for evidence in July as part of their review of legal aid for inquests. What followed was a Government submission document that was riddled with errors, strewn with inaccuracies and in no way befitting the seriousness of the subject. The short turnaround time for submissions

[Stephanie Peacock]

left those whom the Government should have been doing their utmost to hear from unable to sufficiently offer their thoughts.

Furthermore, the document made no explicit mention of, and no adequate attempt to hear from, bereaved families. After its so-called consultation, it was therefore of little surprise that the, in February Ministry of Justice decided to ignore the weight of evidence to the contrary and refused the call for non-means-tested legal aid for inquests where the state has representation.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Government's normal consultation period is 12 weeks. Does my hon. Friend share my surprise that it was six weeks for this consultation, which was held over the peak summer holiday period? Does she share my suspicion about its timing?

Stephanie Peacock: I absolutely share my hon. Friend's concern and suspicion. I hope the Minister will answer that point.

For families to fully and effectively participate in the inquest process, they should have access to free automatic non-means-tested legal representation throughout. The Labour party has pledged to provide that, after listening to those who know best, but the Government remain in denial. However, the playing field must be levelled, the inequality of arms addressed and access to justice made a staple of bereaved families' experience throughout inquests.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, join Inquest's call for legal aid to be made available, especially for people in rural areas, as well as subsistence and travel costs, which can be a real drain on families.

Stephanie Peacock: I support that call. Not only is that the way to discover the truth that will provide redress to individual families in individual cases, but it is an avenue to expose the systematic practice problems that have led to deaths, which can alert the authorities and prevent more. That means providing truth and accountability to prevent another Hillsborough or Grenfell, and ensuring that our justice system works for everyone—not just those who can afford it.

2.42 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I had not planned on speaking, but when I saw the debate's title, I realised that I come at the issue from a variety of angles and, sadly, with a great deal of experience. In about 1994, as a junior lawyer, I was sent—because I was cheap, I suspect—to sit in on inquests concerning elderly people who had died in old people's homes. In those days, it was common practice for us to provide a report for insurance companies, which even junior lawyers were considered capable of, and inquests were viewed as the place where we could garner information.

As a junior lawyer, I thought that was exciting, and I was pleased to see a system that was inquisitorial and not that adversarial, and where real facts were teased out that could be of use, or not, to insurance companies that wanted to protect their assets from later claims. I remember being excited by the ancient nature of the coronial system, by how flexible it could be and by how it can adapt to needs today and later on.

Ultimately, I became a Government lawyer for 17 years and specialised in article 2 inquests. [Interruption.] I am glad to be described as the best of the best, and we were—indeed, we are, incidentally. In that respect, I had the privilege of taking part in some very sad inquests, including many relating to Iraq and Afghanistan, Mr Litvinenko's inquest, the 7/7 bombings inquests, and far too many about prisoner deaths. As a Government lawyer, I hope that I was able to help and counsel families, and that we were able to come to the truth of what happened in many of those tragic situations. I also, rightly, protected the Government's assets in terms of secret material, which is what I was usually there for.

Jo Stevens: The hon. Lady is making an interesting speech, but does she agree that it illustrates exactly the inequality of arms at inquests? Insurance companies and the Government have exceptional lawyers, but the bereaved families do not, and that is why the system is so disadvantageous for them.

Victoria Prentis: I partially agree with the hon. Lady, for whom I have great respect. I am trying to make a speech that is possibly slightly less political than the one that opened the debate, and to say that there are many reasons for inquests. As a Government lawyer I was useful in protecting the secrecy of what had happened. Often, in a war context, for example, important national security secrets had to be protected. It was not awfully much something that we were protecting from families—often families had been talked through the secret issue in the privacy of their home at an earlier date; it was just something that we did not want to have aired in open court. I am not anti-family at all, and I will come on to say why not, but I am trying to explain why, if the Government are lawyered up, it is, I hope, not often in an adversarial way. In my working life, I tried hard to make sure that it was not that way. I completely accept that it does not always look like that.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Others are waiting to speak. Can I drag the hon. Lady on to the legal aid for inquests side of the debate? I think that is what many of those who have put in to speak want to cover.

Victoria Prentis: Yes, Mrs Main. I should also say that I am the parent of a child who died, so I know how ghastly it is for people to think of the death of someone who matters so much to them being legalised. I am fully aware of the impact and full horror of the inquest process for families, which is why we are talking about whether they need legal aid.

The inquest usually comes at a particularly bad time for families. Is it often around the anniversary mark—sadly, in Mr Litvinenko's case, it was seven years later—and it is often at a difficult time in the grieving process. Inquests themselves are horrible. Legal language is used about someone's worst nightmares. In the inquest, the family will meet the other people who were there at the time of death, and hear evidence directly from people who might have been the last to talk to their loved one or, indeed, whom they might blame for causing the death. It is often the first time that that happens. It is really horrible.

Even in the most no-blame type of car accident the inquest may be the first time the family hears truly about the time of death. They will have been told at the time, "Oh, yes, he died instantly," but at the inquest they might find out that he died two or three hours later.

They may find out about the place of death: “Oh, yes, he died instantly at the scene.” Oh no, he did not; he died two or three hours later in hospital. Those are horrible, difficult issues for a family to deal with and very difficult to grapple with, but they are not legal issues, and that is the point I am politely trying to make. This does not have to be adversarial.

In my experience, coroners are very sensitive and well trained these days. Coroners’ officers should be lauded to the skies. They do a great deal of loving and supportive work with families.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): My hon. Friend speaks about a more inquisitorial system. Does she agree that if we are looking at a genuinely inquisitorial system of the kind that would be recognised on the continent, it might help if coroners were able to question and probe rather than being expected purely to be the independent arbiter and judge, which lends itself to cases being more adversarial?

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Lady continues her speech, can I say that it is far broader than the debate we are having. Given the shortness of the debate, I would appreciate it if we could stick to the legal aid aspect that has been explored by the Member who moved the motion. I do not wish to interrupt, and I know that the hon. Lady has personal experience, but I would like her to get on to the debate.

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend’s intervention was helpful, and the point I am trying to make is that I am not sure legal aid is the answer in all cases. I am quite sure that more support is needed for families. I am not sure that that support can be provided only by lawyers. I do support the idea of airline-style investigations—for example, in the health service. We are teasing this out at the moment; it is quite a new concept in the health world, and we have talked about bringing it into the prison world as well. That style of inquisitorial investigation is possibly more useful for families than legal aid. That is the point I am trying to make, Mrs Main—I am sorry if it does not entirely fit with the terms of your debate, but that is why I am not sure that legal aid for inquests—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): It is not my debate; it is the debate of the hon. Lady who introduced it, and it is important that it is on legal aid.

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is here. He is a great man, and he recently managed to steer a private Member’s Bill on stillbirth inquests through the extraordinary system that we have set up for such Bills—I was involved tangentially in framing that Bill. I am not sure whether we need legal aid for the parents of stillborn babies who have inquests—I think the pass is still out on that. We do not want to over-legalise some of these very tragic events.

I welcome the review the Government had, although I slightly take issue with what the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) said about the timing of the review. I suspect, although the Minister may correct me, that the timing was meant to fit in with the legal aid review generally. I counsel hon. Members present not to over-politicise this issue. It is a difficult one. I, for one, am convinced that families need more support, but there might be better people than lawyers to provide it.

2.51 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Before I start, may I say that it is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mrs Main?

I want to begin by saying how much I empathise with the aim of an inquiry, which is to find the truth of the matter when someone has died whose safety has been entrusted to the Government—truth that, when found, can provide the families of the bereaved with much-needed and sought-after closure; that simply tells them how and why it is that their loved ones are no longer here; and that provides a foundation of understanding about what mistakes may have been made and how we can learn from them to ensure that what happened may never happen again.

Yet what we find in the present system of legal aid is a great barrier to the goals of truth and understanding. The aim of the bereaved families, more than any other party in an inquest, is to ensure that what has happened to their loved ones cannot happen again, and that nobody must again feel the pain of losing somebody they love in the same, preventable way that they did. However, under the present rules, bereaved families are more often than not forced to fund their own legal representation in these inquiries.

Under the current financial eligibility rules, the threshold for receiving legal aid for an inquest is only a gross monthly income of £2,657—a gross income of just under £32,000 per year. Those earning more must pay for rent, food and all the other basic essentials of life, as well as what can be the crippling costs of legal fees in inquiries that can take months, if not years, to complete, as in the case of the Mid Staffordshire inquiry, the Morecambe Bay investigation and the Harris review. All those inquiries provided great insight into how the state needed to make changes to protect the lives of those who had been placed into its care. However, those who cannot cover the costs face the prospect of representing themselves in proceedings.

When talking about the Hillsborough disaster, Bishop James Jones described how families who had no public money provided for their legal expenses, or who were self-funded, would be forced to pool their resources. At one of the mini-inquests, one solicitor represented the interests of over 90 families. At the generic inquest, one barrister represented 43 families. One of the families was represented by the mother of the person who had died. What a harrowing experience for a woman who had lost her son to be forced to question witnesses and untangle legal proceedings just to find out what had happened to her child.

Compounding that is the fact that all those other families had no representation whatever. Their voice was stolen away from them because they did not have the financial means to represent themselves. It is simply not right, and it is simply not justice.

When we compare that to the funding that the Government or linked organisations have in these kinds of proceedings, we find that, unlike the bereaved families of those lost, the Government are able to bring the full might of the public purse to bear on these proceedings. On 3 April, the Secretary of State responded to my question about public funding for bereaved families. He stated:

“We must remember that there are ways in which we can be sympathetic to and supportive of bereaved families without ending up in an arms race of who has the most lawyers, the most expensive lawyers and so on”.

[Ms Marie Rimmer]

If we must use the analogy of an arms race, then at present the Government can spend money on the legal equivalent of tanks, helicopters, fleets and so on, while the families of the bereaved are left with the legal equivalent of a stick. It is all well and good for the Secretary of State to argue that we must not enter an arms race, when the Government sit in the position of power, possessing the finance to bring those legal arms to bear.

The Secretary of State also stated that he was “keen to ensure that” inquests “continue to be essentially an inquisitorial process, rather than adversarial”.

However, I and many others in this place and beyond would argue that the process is already adversarial. While the nature of the inquest itself is not adversarial, we often find that the Government and other organisations do not fear the judgment of the coroner’s court, but that of the court of public opinion.

Jo Stevens: Quite often in an inquest a person will be gathering information, and that will be the only venue in which they can do so in advance of potential litigation. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is so important for families to have lawyers with them to enable them to carry out that process?

Ms Rimmer: Absolutely, and that is why I am here today. The Government and other organisations approach proceedings with the aim of damage limitation, instructing combative legal teams to defend state policies and practices, rather than to seek the truth that I spoke of earlier.

There are ways in which we can overcome that imbalance. First, automatic, non-means-tested legal aid for families would both help to level the playing field and prevent families from being burdened with crippling legal costs. It would also avoid forcing families to jump through confusing bureaucratic hoops during what can be one of the most traumatic periods, if not the most traumatic period, in their lives. Non-means-tested legal aid is provided in care and supervision proceedings in which children are to be removed from their parents, and in certain cases under the Mental Health Act 1983 and the Mental Capacity Act 2005, which demonstrates that there is a precedent.

Secondly, funding for families must be equivalent to that enjoyed by the state bodies, public authorities or corporate bodies represented. Ensuring like-for-like spending between the parties involved in inquests would not only further help to level the playing field for bereaved families, but would prevent the arms race that the Secretary of State alluded to in his response on 3 April. The parties mentioned would be able to spend more on lawyers only if the bereaved families received the same funding. As mentioned earlier, bereaved families do not have the means with which to outspend the Government.

I ask the Government to heed the recommendations made by the 1999 Stephen Lawrence inquiry, the 2003 independent review of coroner services, the 2004 Joint Committee on Human Rights, the 2007 Corston report, the 2015 Harris review, the 2016 report of the Chief Coroner to the Lord Chancellor, the 2017 Angiolini review, the 2017 Bach commission, the 2017 Hillsborough review, the 2017 report of the Chief Coroner to the

Lord Chancellor, the 2018 Joint Committee on Human Rights and the 2018 Independent Office for Police Conduct consultation response. I ask them then to finally make the reforms necessary to give bereaved families the tools they need to achieve the fundamental goal of inquests, which is to find out the truth—the simple truth.

3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing the debate and on doing such a good job of presenting her case. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), who is not just a colleague but a good friend. It was good to hear her comments too.

I wish to highlight the case of young Molly Russell’s parents and their fight for legal aid as they tried to make sense of their daughter’s death and to make a change to prevent more deaths. That is heart-rending and touching, and I fully support them. I was relieved to see the Minister’s Department being more positive about helping them—well done for that.

In my constituency, I have seen several cases in which legal aid has been turned down, and that can only be classed as a travesty. I have also watched people representing themselves and receiving help from a judge who felt that, on the day, during the trial, they should advise the person before them. The hon. Member for Barnsley East referred to how complex the system is, and it is sometimes hard to follow how it works. However, that should not happen in genuine cases in which there is an element of public interest and a need for not just representation but the correct representation.

There must be a more open route to public inquiry funding, but there must also be safeguards in place. Lessons have to be learned from the likes of the Bloody Sunday inquiry, during which approximately £400 million was claimed, although not paid out. After that, there was a question about, and an inquiry into, the fees for the solicitors’ firms. Almost £200 million was paid out in that one case. That is astronomical. There must be a clear delineation as to what is in the public interest. A system is now in place for legacy issues in Northern Ireland. There is a budget to be used for these cases to ensure that there is not further Saville inquiry palaver—to use a word used quite often in Ulster Scots. I understand that there is not an unlimited supply of finance, but the decision not to introduce automatic public funding where the state is represented, and it being cited that the policy change would cost between £30 million and £70 million, seems strange when the cost of just one case in Northern Ireland was allowed to run up to £200 million.

My parliamentary aide may not be on the breadline—we know she is not—but could she afford to take on the Government? No, she could not. Could anyone in the House today afford to take on the Government? I suggest that the answer is no. Therefore, on behalf of our constituents, whom we are here to represent, the argument has to be that they would find that difficult as well. Most people could not do it. There must be some middle ground that we have not yet reached that takes account of the representations of those who need legal aid to satisfy their own conscience, to answer the questions they have and to get beyond the period of grief that they are clearly experiencing.

I recently read an article that furiously challenged the decision. It stated:

“The ministry said: ‘Means testing serves to determine the allocation of taxpayers’ money to those most in need. This mechanism upholds the wider policy intention of the existing legal aid statutory framework of ensuring that legal aid is targeted at those who need it most,’

as it should be,

“for the most serious cases in which legal advice or representation is justified. An additional spend of £30m-£70m would run counter to this wider policy intention.”

I have always supported access to legal aid, whatever the case may be. I know that this debate is specifically about inquests, but I have supported legal aid being available across the board and have always been of that opinion. I supported that when I was in my previous job in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I am on record as supporting it in this House as well. But I do understand that, in relation to inquests, there is a special need. The hon. Member for Barnsley East, in introducing the debate, explained that special need, and you have guided us, Mrs Main, on how best we should do that as well.

I want to finish with this comment. Inquest, a campaigning charity—most of us will know it and the good work that it does—has called for automatic non-means-tested legal aid funding to families for specialist representation immediately after a state-related death, to cover preparation for and representation at the inquest and for other legal processes. We are elected representatives and compassionate people. Our compassionate nature as representatives should be reflected in what we ask the Minister for today. I fully support the call for legal aid at inquests and believe that that message should go from this place today. I gently and respectfully ask the Minister for a positive response to help those who find themselves in a very difficult situation. On legal aid for inquests, let us do our best for them.

3.5 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing this debate. It concerns a very technical subject that is hugely important to a number of constituents, whether because of large tragedies involving the multiple loss of human life or because of the single tragedy of losing someone, from a baby through to someone in adulthood. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) for her kind words about my private Member’s Bill, now an Act, which will enable coroners to have the power to launch inquests into stillbirths. The consultation, which has already been launched by the Ministry for Justice, will explore the whole issue of legal aid for those inquests, too. It is very important that we get the consultation right, so that measures in this sensitive area can be brought in proportionately and appropriately and help in the campaign to reduce the number of stillbirths in this country, which we all wish well. It is also important to explain to already traumatised and grieving parents exactly what happened and how improvements can be made to the system to make sure it is less likely to happen to other parents in that situation in the future.

Jo Stevens: In addition, would the hon. Gentleman support legal aid for people who are killed at work? It is not available for the many people who die in fatal accidents in work every year.

Tim Loughton: That is a completely different subject, and one that needs to be looked at, absolutely. I am sympathetic to this. When families are faced with the sudden loss of a loved one through circumstances that are well beyond their control—in a workplace, air crash, or whatever—we need to give them every support and not add challenges such as the need to try to find the money to fund lawyers to try to get to the basics of the truth.

I want to focus purely on the Shoreham air show crash in my constituency. On that fateful summer’s day in August 2015, 11 Sussex men were tragically in the wrong place at the wrong time and lost their lives. Almost four years on, we have still not had the inquest for that tragedy. For a range of issues, not least the fact that there has now been a trial, which was completed last month, that delay has meant that the families of those 11 men have been denied the opportunity to get to the bottom of the truth for an extended period, compounding the grief, confusion and challenges that they have felt. We need to do more to make their pain less in any way we can. The system is not working for such people, as we have heard in the case of other tragedies as well.

To recap, in August 2015 those 11 men lost their lives when a Hawker jet crashed on the A27, on the very spot where I had been travelling in my car four minutes before the accident happened. It could have been a much more serious tragedy, and as it was, it was the largest civilian loss of life since the London terrorist attack in 2005. It had a huge impact, not only on those families directly affected, but on the wider community of my constituency and beyond, which still remembers and is in the process of installing a permanent memorial to the loss of life in that tragedy.

The pilot was acquitted. I make no comment about that, other than to say that those families sat through the trial with great dignity—I joined them at the beginning and end—listening to the lurid details of exactly what happened and watching the footage taken by people’s mobile phones of the plane coming down. They sat through that trial with great dignity, and they then had to accept a verdict that they did not want and had not expected.

Justice went through its due courses—I make no criticism of that—but it means that the inquest, which had to wait until the trial was completed, is now even more important for those families who wish to try to flush out who was responsible, and whether any parties contributed to that accident in some way. Most importantly, what is being done to try to minimise the likelihood of such an accident happening again in future?

The record of civil aviation shows was virtually unblemished in this country, and there had been no on-the-ground casualties since the Farnborough tragedy in the 1950s. This was a huge and important event that went well beyond its impact on the local community and the families. I pay tribute to the local coroner for West Sussex, Penny Schofield, who has worked tirelessly with the families to try to manage their expectations and to be as sensitive as possible about their continuing grief. What has compounded that grief, however, is the issue of legal aid—I know you want me to come on to that, Mrs Main. Legal aid is the focus of what I am about to say, but I wanted to put it into context, as I am sure you will appreciate.

[*Tim Loughton*]

The inquest is likely to happen in the autumn, more than four years since the tragedy took place. At last count there will be at least 19 interested parties, including a number of public bodies such as Sussex police, the Civil Aviation Authority, the Air Accidents Investigation Branch, and the Health and Safety Executive, which will have legal representation paid for out of the public purse. Until recently—this has still not been confirmed—the only parties whose legal representation at that inquest will not be paid for will be the families of the 11 victims. Arguably, therefore, the people who are most important and have the greatest interest in those proceedings will have no legal representation at the inquest. That is a travesty of justice, and I once secured a debate explicitly on that subject. I have also spoken to the Minister about the issue, and raised it at Prime Minister's questions. I have worked with the families and their lawyers, but the system is not working.

In 2017 there was a bid to the Legal Aid Agency and the exceptional cases fund to get legal representation paid for during the inquest, but that was turned down on the basis that somehow it was not within the scope of the ECF and did not represent the wider public interest. That is extraordinary because what I learned during this process is that civilian air shows have the second largest public audience of any activity in this country. There is a huge wider public interest, given the many hundreds of air shows that happen up and down the country each year.

The AAIB's report was published in March 2017 and stated that

“the parties involved in the planning, conduct and regulatory oversight of the flying display did not have formal safety management systems in place to identify and manage the hazards and risks. There was a lack of clarity about who owned which risk and who was responsible for the safety of the flying display...Controls intended to protect the public from the hazards of displaying aircraft were ineffective”.

It added that there was a valid, proper and serious legal argument that the CAA failed as a regulator in properly implementing the safety recommendations made over six years by the AAIB after a previous fatal Hawker crash. If that does not represent a wider public interest, I do not know what does.

The coroner spoke in support of ensuring that legal aid is available to pay for legal representation for the families when the case is put in front of her at the inquest. She said:

“This is a highly complicated case. It involves areas of aviation law which are complex and technical in nature. Families will struggle to participate in the Inquest in any meaningful way without the assistance of legal representation. The Inquest will engage a number of complex legal issues including article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights. It is further complicated by the fact that I will be sitting with a Jury. If the families are not represented it is likely that the Inquest, which is already likely to last up to 8 weeks, will take considerably longer”.

Those are the words of the coroner, who says not only that it is unfair for the families not to have legal representation when all those public bodies do, but that it will be difficult for them to participate and to assimilate the proceedings of the inquest properly without legal experts to put it to them, and that it could end up costing more.

If we provide a legal expert to represent all the families as a whole, it will make proceedings more efficient, but if all the families look to have legal representation, or even to represent themselves, it will spin out the inquest and cost the public purse more. Not making sure that legal aid is available for those families is an entirely false economy. That was the coroner speaking about the inquest that will come in front of her. The lawyers acting for the families have also produced papers that show how essential it is for family members to have legal representation at that inquest, which must be provided by the public purse.

The decision by the Legal Aid Agency not to permit funding under the exceptional case funding provisions, which were introduced by the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, is patently wrong and unjust. Exceptional case funding is available for categories of law that are not in scope for legal aid, and where failure to provide legal services would be in breach of an individual's rights within the meaning of the Human Rights Act 1998, or other enforceable EU rights relating to the provision of local legal services.

Inquests have never, however, fallen within the main body of legal aid provision. Legal aid for inquests is available only at the discretion of the Legal Aid Agency under the exceptional case funding provisions introduced by the LASPO Act. This is just the sort of case that was envisaged when setting up the fund in the original Act, so it is nothing to do with cuts in legal aid funding, as some have tried to claim, but is about the provisions in the legislation apparently not working.

The Law Society supports the application and strongly believes that bereaved families should have access to legal representation where possible. It says that the definition of exceptional case funding does not provide an adequate safety net for inquests. Applications for exceptional funding are highly complex and time consuming, and require applicants to have an understanding of human rights law, and, in the case of inquests, to show that there is an article 2 right to life issue or a wider public interest in legal aid being granted. Even when one of those triggers is present, the Legal Aid Agency guidance suggests that the assumption should still be that the bereaved family does not need representation because the process is inquisitorial and led by the coroner, rather than adversarial, but the Law Society challenges how far a bereaved family can be expected to engage effectively with a legal process that relates to the death of a loved one.

I pay tribute to the legal firm *Stewarts Law*, which is providing a lot of support to the families, largely pro bono. It has challenged the ruling. Unofficially, we are optimistic that legal aid funding may be available when the inquest comes around, but the families should not have had to fight for it. It should have been there as a matter of course—as was intended in the original 2012 Act. The inequality of arms is inequitable and could undermine the inquest's ability to serve the public interest by failing to protect the rights of the families under ECHR article 2, and there is clearly a wider public interest.

I welcome the Government review of the LASPO Act, which the Minister recently published, but it does not make the future of exceptional case funding clear. The Minister might wish to comment on this when she winds up, but in response to the review we need to look at this further and in more detail to make sure that

when tragedies such as the Shoreham air show disaster happen, and in the many applications that we have heard about when there is a multiple or single loss of life, the system automatically swings in to support the families, rather than putting yet further hurdles in the way of their securing justice and access to the truth, which only exacerbates their trauma, tragedy and grief. We surely owe it to people who have been unfortunate enough to suffer such loss to do everything to support them and not put obstacles in their way.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Wind-up speeches will begin at 3.37. I have three speakers left; the maths are fairly self-evident.

3.20 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing this incredibly important debate. As she has said, access to justice is a fundamental issue. Inquests where families are properly legally represented are important not only for the families' sakes, but because they perform a wider public service to ensure that lessons are learnt so that things change for other people and so that lives may be saved in future. That is achieved by ventilating the issues in public and putting those potentially responsible for the deaths under proper scrutiny.

If the families are not fully involved to press to ensure that such lessons are learnt, an inquest is far less likely to result in the wider reform and lesson-learning from which we all benefit. It is naive to expect that an inquest in which the family is not legally represented, but in which the agencies of the state are fully represented, will approach an investigation into a death with a genuine desire to uncover failings. On the contrary, state agencies approach inquests with the express objective of, at best, damage limitation and, at worst, to undermine and downplay the concerns of families. I urge the Minister to look at the submission made by Liberty on the review of legal aid eligibility and the exchange that took place between counsel for Surrey police and the father of one of those who died at Deepcut barracks to see probably one of the worst, most callous and distressing lines of questioning imaginable. Although there was legal representation on that occasion, it is concerning to think that a family member could be faced with such cross-examination without any support at all.

I mention Deepcut because in 2002 one of my constituents, Yvonne Heath, tragically lost her son, James Collinson, to gunshot wounds there. She is among four families who have been looking for answers ever since. The other three families have had or are in the middle of inquests, and there is no doubt that it is in the public interest for there to be one into James's death as well. I understand that the other families have all had to face what has been described to me as a tortuous and intrusive process just to get legal aid granted. It should be absolutely self-evident that the families need representation at the inquests, so I put the Minister on notice that should my constituent face similar obstacles to obtaining legal aid to the previous families, she can expect regular representations from me until the right thing is done.

I have no doubt about the value that representation can provide at an inquest. I have previously spoken in a debate here about the sad case of Ronald Volante, whose daughter, Rita Cuthell, is a constituent of mine. Ronald died in tragic circumstances when an ambulance call made via a community alarm service led to his call not receiving the priority needed. When the ambulance turned up two hours later, it was too late. We had various meetings following that debate and improvements have been made to procedures, but one area where there has not been any change relates to the experience that my constituent had at the inquest. There is no doubt that she would have benefited enormously from legal representation. I know how distressing and bewildering it was, and how she did not feel that the process gave her the answers that she needed.

If the Minister needs any more persuasion on the importance of the issue, there are many examples of how improvements were made and lessons learned that would not have happened but for the involvement of legally aided, represented families cross-examining witnesses and pressing for change. Such examples include the inquest into the death of Corporal Anne-Marie Ellement, who died after reporting rape and bullying in the Army. The inquest led to recommendations that a special kind of victim support be made available to soldiers who complain of sexual assault against other soldiers, as well as improvements in mental health training and procedures. It also led to soldiers being given information about non-military sources of support and help in the aftermath of sexual assault.

The inquest into the death of Sean Benton, who died at Deepcut in 1995, finally revealed the true extent of the abuses and assaults that trainees had suffered at the camp and has led the police to open a criminal investigation. That would not have happened had the family not been legally represented to press for it. The inquest also led to the Army's undertaking to the coroner that it would ensure that in future all trainee soldiers would be informed that if they were the victim of a criminal offence they could approach the civilian, as opposed to just the military, police. That happened only as a consequence of the family pressing for it at the inquest. I doubt whether it would have happened had they not been legally represented.

A cursory glance at the relevant pages of summaries of inquest findings demonstrates the enormous potential of inquests to identify and learn from failings when people have died where there is state involvement. For example, a jury found that failings in the immigration detention centre system had contributed to the killing of Tarek Chowdhury, and another inquest found serious failures at Sodexo-run HM Prison Peterborough, which contributed to the death of a prisoner, Annabella Landsberg. An inquest found that failings by South West London and St George's Mental Health Trust had caused the death of Charlotte Ball. Finally, an inquest found there was neglect involved in the death of 18-year-old Connor Sparrowhawk, which resulted in the coroner making various formal recommendations.

In all those cases the families were legally represented, which demonstrates the enormous public interest and value in ensuring that lessons are learned from the most tragic cases. That can be achieved only if families are represented on an equal footing against state bodies. It is a basic tenet of justice that everyone is equal before

[Justin Madders]

the law. When well resourced public bodies are legally represented at inquests it is only right that the bereaved families seeking answers should be represented as well.

3.26 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Main.

To be fair to the Minister, as I always try to be, the issue is not a new one, and has not appeared on her watch. I remember appearing at inquests more than 20 years ago when lack of representation for families, including in death in custody cases, meant that Inquest—led then, I think, as now, by the admirable Deborah Coles—was going around finding pro bono lawyers to act for families.

I do not entirely agree with the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) about lack of need, and indeed the Government's report includes something about families receiving legal aid, and being represented. Not all coroners treat families well in those situations, not all lawyers acting for state agents behave well, and not all witnesses tell the truth, particularly when they may be found negligent, or even culpable of causing death.

I share the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) about the Government's report, that the process was not entirely right. The fact that it came out with the rest of the LASPO review meant that it got rather lost in all that. It shares some of the faults of the LASPO review in that the facts are well marshalled but do not appear to bear out the conclusions. In particular, the report states that

“a number of stakeholders pointed out that it should not be assumed that in cases where the state has legal representation, representation for the family is necessarily required nor that it enhances the results of the coroner's investigation. They suggested that the addition of further lawyers might actually hinder the process, by making the process more adversarial and legally complex.”

The Government hide behind other “stakeholders”, whoever they are, but that is a rather cynical way of dismissing families' concerns. How else, other than by the provision of legal aid—because pro bono cannot carry the weight of inquests in its entirety, although lawyers do a good job—are we to deal with complex medical and legal issues, with coronial rules that are not straightforward and are unique in the way they work, as well as securing evidence, preparing cases and challenging witnesses? As an analogy, public family law cases are one of the few areas where there is still representation for families, because it is perceived that the issues are crucial and the state has a lot of power in those cases. I do not see that inquests are different.

The case of Molly Russell was mentioned. I am not going to deal with the facts of that case, but nevertheless it is true that legal aid was refused on the basis that the matter is not of “wider public interest” and because of the means test. The matter was being appealed, but then the Legal Aid Agency just changed its mind, which shows rather faulty logic. I have been involved in a number of cases, including the tragic case of my constituent Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, who died on an airline flight because of an allergen in a Pret a Manger sandwich that she was eating. That led to a prevention of future deaths report that made substantial recommendations to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other Government agencies.

I could mention, also—I wish I had more time—some of the cases involving the Whirlpool company. I have had incidents in my constituency, but in particular I want to talk about the death of Douglas McTavish and Bernard Hender in Llanrwst. That was caused by an electrical fault in a Hotpoint tumble dryer, which caused the fire which led to their death. In all these cases, there is a need for proper representation in the public interest, even though those involved are not state actors.

Why should there be legal aid in such cases? In many cases, the Government should have been aware of the risks, but took no action—whether that involved the Office for Product Safety and Standards, the Food Standards Agency or the internet and internet regulation, which are very topical at the moment. The Minister cannot get away with the report that has been done so far. These matters need to be properly looked at again.

3.30 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I hope that my constituent's experience can help to illuminate some of the learned arguments that have been made today. Families can provide important inputs to help a coroner reach correct findings and make recommendations to help state bodies to improve their systems and avoid more tragic cases.

My constituent, Angela, is a senior manager in social care. She has huge experience of local care systems. Her son, Adrian, suffered from mental health issues all his adult life. In 2016, he was taken into the care of a mental health hospital but discharged a few weeks later into the care of the community mental health team. He was told by that team that he would be discharged from any support just two weeks after his discharge from the hospital. He was distraught about that. His mother, Angela, was frantically seeking some support for her son on the Friday before he took his life. She had obviously been involved with him throughout his life. Having not found support on the Friday—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. This is not an ongoing case, is it?

Ruth George: It is not an ongoing case, Mrs Main. I took your advice.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): We have to be very careful.

Ruth George: Absolutely. I have full permission from the constituent to raise the details.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Thank you.

Ruth George: Adrian took some drugs and alcohol on 10 December. He was found by police at 2.30 in the morning and taken to the local A&E. However, the police left, and he was allowed to walk out without being triaged. He later lost consciousness at a friend's home and passed away.

The inquest with the coroner involved the mental health trust, the hospital trust and the police. It was to take place over an eight-day period—although that was reduced to four days—with barristers representing the three bodies, all with their legal representation funded by the state. When I first met Angela, before the inquest took place, she had been told she would not qualify for legal aid. Although she was desperate to use her personal

and professional experience to make changes to the systems to make sure no other parent had to go through this, she was not sure she would be able to participate fully in the inquest, due to a lack of representation.

The coroner, when considering applying article 2 of the Human Rights Act and using a jury, finally decided that the family should have legal representation, but that was just three days before the inquest. Angela had to go through very detailed financial statements, which was very personally intrusive at the time she was grieving, a year after she had buried her son.

In the end, she was able to participate with the help of her lawyer, and she pays tribute to the lawyer and the barrister. With three organisations all arguing about who was culpable in the circumstances, Angela felt it was very important not only that she was able to be involved and put the facts of the matter straight, but that she could make sure that recommendations were made.

I quote Angela's comments on the coroner's report:

"Following Adrian's death, the burning question we asked ourselves was 'did we do everything we could to gain support for him? Did we call enough people or shout loud enough to be heard? Was there more we could have done?'. Given the evidence that was heard through Adrian's inquest, it became clear that as a family we had not failed our son, although this may not be said for some of the professionals involved in his care. We will miss Adrian for the rest of our lives, but hope that changes will be made in the near future to avoid further deaths following the recommendations made by the coroner".

Families in this situation have just one opportunity to make a difference; that opportunity is at the inquest, where, as some learned Members have said, incredibly difficult facts may be put to them about the death of their loved one. It is not only important that families are able to grieve, have their voices heard and find the truth, but that we as a society and our state agencies can learn from their experience and their support and make recommendations so that no family has to go through this again.

3.35 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on having secured this debate.

Families affected by a state-related death are already going through some of the most difficult moments of their lives, but if they cannot afford legal representation, the process of finding out what happened and why is made harder still. It is almost impossible for me to put into words the pain, fear and frustration that is in these human stories. The stories we have heard about their constituents from my hon. Friends the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for High Peak (Ruth George) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) are the most compelling arguments for change that anyone could make.

Reading through the testimonies that bereaved families have provided to the Government's recent review highlights the gaping injustice at the heart of our justice system, which must be addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East made an excellent speech, and it is worth reading part of one of the comments from a family member once more:

"We had to do everything ourselves. We had no lawyer at the inquest. Those three weeks were the most terrifying thing I've ever done in my life".

Another explained:

"Families are often left in the dark, trying to sort out numerous matters associated with a loved one dying whilst under the protection of the state, while trying to make sense of what has happened both emotionally and legally. Having access to funded legal representation is paramount for justice."

Today's debate is about the fundamental values and principles of our justice system, which should never leave people feeling afraid and helpless when seeking truth and justice for their loved ones. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) spoke particularly powerfully about that point: is our justice system fair if state bodies are legally represented at inquests, and victims' families are not?

The Government's recent review states that about 30,000 cases per year result in an inquest. Of those, about 500 are related to deaths in custody or other forms of state detention, whether that is police, prison or immigration detention or detention under the Mental Health Act. Will the Minister confirm what the year-on-year rise is in litigants in person at such inquests? In such cases, the bereaved families deserve state support in their pursuit of the truth, but proper legal representation is also about preventing others from suffering, by identifying mistakes and ensuring future deaths are prevented. It is an urgent and ongoing issue for everyone in this country and should be treated as such, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston stated in his contribution.

The need for better state-funded legal support for bereaved families at inquests has been a central recommendation of several major reviews in recent years, including Bishop James Jones's powerful Hillsborough report; Dame Elish Angiolini's independent review of deaths in police custody, which was initiated by the Prime Minister herself; the independent review of the Mental Health Act; and Baroness Corston's review of vulnerable women in the justice system. All of those reviews called for a major improvement to funding for bereaved families at inquests, in order to prevent further miscarriages of justice of the sort that shocked us all in the cases that have been mentioned. When such heavyweight reports about profound flaws in our justice system, often commissioned by the Government, call for better legal representation, it would be astonishing if the Government did not do the decent thing and adhere to their recommendations.

However, the Government's review into legal aid for inquests just let bereaved families down again. The charity Inquest, which works with bereaved people, lawyers and support agencies, providing expertise on state-related deaths and their investigation, labelled the Government's inaction

"a betrayal of those who invested in this review in the hope of securing meaningful change".

Having listened to the story about the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak, it is hard to conclude anything different. If the Government do not listen to me, or even to the charity sector, can the Minister give me one good reason why they have chosen to ignore the powerful, united voices of Bishop James, Baroness Corston and Dame Angiolini?

There are families trying desperately to afford the crippling costs of legal fees they never expected to need to pay. We are seeing increasing numbers of families whose

[Gloria De Piero]

loved ones were killed in horrific accidents crowdfunding vital legal help, and the ongoing failure of the legal aid system to treat even the most determined families fairly.

Last year—Mrs Main, this is all in the public domain—the families of five men killed when a wall collapsed at a recycling plant were denied legal aid for the inquest. The men were crushed to death under a pile of concrete, bricks and scrap metal in 2016. Their families, who are from Gambia and Senegal, applied for funding for a lawyer to represent them at the inquest, to establish the circumstances around the deaths, potentially leading to compensation from the employers. Despite meeting the means test and not speaking English, they were turned down for legal aid. The Health and Safety Executive and the recycling company were both to be represented by lawyers, so the families would have been at a significant disadvantage if they had been left without one. Could they represent themselves in court, with no English and no knowledge of the legal system? Of course not. They resorted to crowdfunding their legal fees—reduced to shaking a modern version of the collection tin in pursuit of their basic rights to truth and justice. They managed to raise over £3,000 to fund their costs before their appeal was finally heard and legal aid was granted—after the inquest had already begun.

That completely unnecessary stress during such a traumatising process can be blamed only on a totally dysfunctional system, which should obviously have known that the families were eligible, given that they met the means-testing criteria and spoke no English. This protracted process cannot possibly have had any advantages for the public purse, but it will have cost bereaved families a great deal in emotional stress. It is that process that was raised by the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), and also by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who spoke about the 11 men who lost their lives and the inadequacy of exceptional case funding.

Will the Minister tell me how common she believes crowdfunding is for inquests? Following on from the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East regarding the Government's inadequate consultation, will the Government publish a list of respondents to their review and a summary report of the responses? Will they also publish the findings of their survey of coroners and the coroners support service?

A Labour Government would commit to providing proper legal support to those who have been the victims of deaths in custody, with legal aid for representation at inquests. Truth is the first step towards justice, and quality legal support is a key first step towards the truth.

Although she did not make a speech, I should just mention my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens). I always learn things from her when she makes an intervention, because she brings so much experience to these issues.

Unless the Government will commit, as Labour has, to giving automatic, non-means-tested legal aid funding to families to allow them to seek specialist legal representation following a state-related death, I suspect bereaved families and those who support them through the inquest process will continue to feel nothing towards this Government but a deep sense of betrayal and abandonment.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on securing a debate on this important subject. She spoke passionately about the issue, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond.

Last Friday I had the opportunity to visit Westminster coroner's court to watch an inquest. I saw first hand the professionalism of the coroner and the importance of the inquest process to the bereaved family. Before turning to the individual points that have been made in this debate, I would like to set out some facts in relation to the inquest process, the purpose of an inquest and what we have done to improve that process. I would also like to mention some of the types of cases that inquests deal with, which we have heard about throughout the debate, and to respond to the points that have been made in relation to legal aid. I would like to do that, because it is important to understand the process and how legal aid fits into it.

The starting point is, what is the purpose of an inquest? An inquest is an investigation by a coroner into a death reported to them, and it should answer four questions: what is the identity of the deceased, what is the place of death, what is the time of death, and how did the deceased person come to his or her death? An inquest is a public court hearing to determine those matters.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) said—as we heard, she has considerable experience of these issues—an inquest is meant to be an inquisitorial process, not an adversarial one. Bereaved families have a special status in any inquest. They do not have to make legal arguments, but they can question witnesses, or ask coroners to question them on their behalf. Inquests are essentially about fact finding.

At the inquest I saw on Friday, a man had either taken his own life or died from natural causes. The family were given every opportunity to question the toxicologist and the doctor present. There was no legal representation on either side, and at the end of the inquest the father of the deceased thanked the coroner for her findings and commented that she could not have done much more.

As with all legal processes, we can make room for improvement. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) suggested that not everyone who appears at an inquest—for example, coroners or legal representatives—always behaves as they should. We have sought to improve the experience of bereaved families who go through this process at such a tragic time, and I wish to highlight some of the changes that we have made or are making.

First, we are in the process of revising the information we give families on coronial processes, to ensure that it is tailored to them. We have re-established a stakeholder forum to engage with other Departments and external stakeholders and to consider what more can be done to ensure that the process is inquisitorial, as it should be. Our reforms allow bereaved families access to most documents seen by the court, and they should expect the coroner's office to update them at regular intervals and explain each stage of the process. We have also

introduced the role of Chief Coroner, who provides leadership, guidance and support to coroners, and we have engaged with him on training for coroners and their officers, which will be delivered in 2019-20.

As we have heard, many types of inquest come before coroners. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned stillbirths and the tragedy in his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury spoke of her experience in a number of matters, and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned some terrible stories. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) told us of the experience of someone in her constituency. At the inquest last week, a number of cases were opened at the start of the hearing. They involved men who had died—some had taken their own lives, some cases involved drugs, and some were in foreign countries.

None of those cases involved the state. Other cases do involve the state, however, and there is a question over whether the state or its agents were responsible. Those are known as article 2 inquest cases, in reference to the state duty to protect life under article 2 of the European convention on human rights. In those cases an enhanced investigation must decide not only who died, when, where and how, but the broader circumstances of their death.

As hon. Members have suggested, it is likely in such circumstances that the state will be represented. Bereaved families may require representation, and legal aid for that may be available through the exceptional case funding scheme—my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned that, as did the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero).

Legal aid for representation through the ECF scheme may be provided where failure to provide representation would amount to, or risk, a breach of article 2, or where there is a wider public interest. In the last two years, 339 applications for publicly funded representation at an inquest were granted, and we have taken a number of measures to ensure that ECF funding is more easily granted.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, most people who apply for legal aid generally in civil law have to satisfy a means and merits threshold. That is to ensure that public money is well spent. Those who do not merit legal aid should not get it, and those who can afford to pay themselves should do so. We have recently made it easier in two ways to obtain legal aid. First, we have made changes to ensure that there is a presumption that the article 2 threshold is satisfied in cases where there is a death in state custody. Secondly, we have relaxed the means test.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned the stress of filling in the form at a difficult time. In June, we updated the Lord Chancellor's guidance so that the Legal Aid Agency can disregard the means test and take into account the stress that the family are going through, which may be exacerbated by the legal aid process. Furthermore, only the individual applicant's financial means will be tested, and not the means of family members, which will help to ease the burden of the application process.

As the hon. Members for Barnsley East and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) mentioned, the process is complicated. In February, we identified that

we will do a wider review of legal aid. We have committed to simplifying the exceptional case funding forms and guidance to ensure that applying for legal aid is as simple as possible. We will put more money into resourcing that to ensure that funding decisions by the Legal Aid Agency are made in as timely a manner as possible.

Ruth George: The Minister has described how there is some process for people to apply for legal aid, but in my constituent's case the decision was made only three days before the inquest. She had to attend a pre-inquest trial with three barristers, which was incredibly upsetting. She also had to go through her personal finances, including her car finance, to make the application again—on top of what was happening with the inquest and the anniversary of her son's death. Does the Minister agree that that process would be assisted if there was automatic legal aid for victims' families?

Lucy Frazer: I hope that I have identified a number of measures that we are putting in place that may help the hon. Lady's constituent. We are making sure that the process is easier. The Legal Aid Agency is looking at linking up with banks and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, not just in relation to inquests but across the board, to automatically see whether people satisfy the means test, without them having to fill in a whole load of forms. I appreciate that, obviously, automatic non-means-tested legal aid would be much easier for everybody, but we are taking steps to make things easier within the ambit of having a means test.

In February, we announced another measure that may help the hon. Lady's constituent, which is that we have agreed to backdate the legal help waiver. The director of legal aid casework has the discretion to backdate funding for ECF representation to the date that the ECF application was made, but he did not have the discretion to backdate funding for legal help, even when an application for the means-test assessment to be waived had been successful. We have committed to changing that by the end of the year.

The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) mentioned the threshold for legal aid, as did several other hon. Members. Our action plan sets out a broad, across-the-board review of the means-test threshold for legal aid, which will include the means test for inquests. We have committed to looking at the threshold at which people become eligible for legal aid across the board. We have also committed to launching a campaign to raise awareness about the availability of legal support, including legal aid, which will ensure that all bereaved families are aware of their rights to claim ECF.

I was disappointed by the cynical suggestion of several hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Barnsley East and for Hammersmith, that the timescale of the review that we conducted was somehow inappropriate. The hon. Member for Hammersmith identified that that review ran alongside the legal aid review, and the timing was dictated by the legal aid review, which we promised to publish by the end of the year, as he is aware.

Jo Stevens: The Minister has not explained why the consultation lasted for only six weeks rather than 12. Is she disappointed that only 48 out of the 89 coroner areas in England and Wales responded to the survey? They are obviously not very interested in the review either.

Lucy Frazer: We wanted to publish the review at the same time as the legal aid review. In addition, we have committed to look subsequently at a key part that will affect inquests in relation to the threshold, so we are now undertaking a review of the threshold. All the comments made about inquests will be carried forward to that review, which is ongoing.

Some hon. Members mentioned families' input into the review. Some 20 families provided evidence, and we held a roundtable event for bereaved families. The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston and others mentioned funding and an inequality of arms, which I will touch on. We say in our report that we are interested in looking at that area more fully. There are a variety of ways to tackle funding, all of which involve working with other Departments that may be represented in a hearing involving an article 2 case. It might involve reminding those that take part in the process on behalf of the Government of their duty of candour. It might involve asking Government Departments to look at their own instruction of lawyers and whether they need the number they instruct. It might also involve looking into further options for funding legal support at inquests where the state has state-funded representation. We will look at all those issues and will work closely with other Government Departments.

In conclusion, very important issues have been raised about the inquest process. It is important that an inquest is sensitive and meets the needs of the bereaved. Legal aid and the process in relation to state deaths are an important issue, as we have heard in the debate today, but legal aid is only one part of the jigsaw, and we must look at the whole system more widely if we are to deliver access to justice.

I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley East for securing the debate on legal aid for inquests. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, and I thank you, Mrs Main, for chairing it.

3.58 pm

Stephanie Peacock: I thank hon. Members for their powerful contributions. We have heard so many examples of why change is needed, and I want to briefly mention a few. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned a travesty of justice and the families of the victims of the terrible Shoreham air show crash. He mentioned that they will not have legal representation and talked about how they have been turned down for legal aid, showing clearly how the system is broken. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about the tortuous process of getting legal aid. A tragic case was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George). In seeking justice and truth, bereaved families want to help other families and prevent future deaths.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) remarked on the political nature of my speech. I gently say to her that decisions about public expenditure are inherently political. We have been given no answer on, and there is no excuse for, the huge disparity in funding between the Government and victims. Labour Members make no apology for calling for equality and justice. It is all very well to say that inquests are inquisitorial in nature, but time and again that is simply not the experience of families. The system is not equal.

I thank the Minister for her comments, but they simply do not go far enough. She talked about the merits of means, but this issue is not comparable to other legal aid applications. Families do not choose to be part of the process. She has given no real explanation for the disappointing consultation.

I will conclude by quoting Inquest, which states:

“Specialist legal representation and input from families is crucial to ensuring robust post-death investigations and inquests. Inquests must shine a light on any state failings”.

I implore the Minister: please listen to Inquest.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Primary Care: Plymouth

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those not staying for this debate please be kind enough to leave quickly and quietly, because we are moving on to the important issue of primary care provision in Plymouth?

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered primary care provision in Plymouth.

Today is a special treat for me. Not only is it my 39th birthday, but I have a chance to raise the concerns of the people I represent about a very important issue: their difficulty accessing primary care in Plymouth. This is the second time that I have spoken in this place about primary care in Plymouth, having participated in a similar debate in March last year, and never has the issue been more pressing.

I will start, though, with a welcome and a thank you. First, I welcome the new Minister to her place. I have great respect for her, and there is sincere warmth towards her from both Government and Opposition Members—although perhaps they are not in the Chamber today. She has a very difficult job, and I genuinely wish her well. She is not the type of Minister to play party politics; she does engage with the issue, and I am really pleased that she is able to respond to this debate.

Secondly, I thank all those medical professionals who work in primary care in Plymouth: the doctors, including GPs, paramedics, nurses, community pharmacists, dentists, medical students, receptionists, wellbeing professionals, volunteers, patient participation groups and many more besides. Their dedication and good will is the glue that is holding together a very fragile system in Plymouth, and I place my thanks to them on the record right away.

Many GPs in Plymouth often work long hours—12 or 13-hour days. They do so out of dedication to their patients and to the health service, but they simply cannot be expected to do more and more with less and less. I am pleased to have secured this debate. When I was elected, I said that I would try to give Plymouth its voice back in Parliament by raising the issues that really matter, and primary care is one of those issues that comes up at nearly every constituency surgery that I hold. People who live in Plymouth know that the far south-west does not get its fair share of funding, and that is true from health to education and from transport to housing—all get below-average spend. Ours is one of the lowest funded regions in the UK, and that has consequences for our public services.

I worry that with the housing crisis, the NHS crisis, the crisis in young people's mental health and the social care crisis, we are at risk of crisis fatigue. That is where the exceptional support required to resolve any one crisis is no longer given because a crisis is no longer exceptional.

I think that these debates are best done on a cross-party basis. Plymouth is represented by three Members of Parliament, and I am sorry that the other two are not here today, but I hope the Minister will recognise that many of the things I speak about are cross-party concerns. I will attempt to keep party politics out of my remarks today.

Plymouth's primary care is in a state of crisis. Our GPs are working to the point of exhaustion because of the lack of funding and resources not just in primary care, but throughout the system. I think that it would be helpful to hear the voices of those on the frontline. An inner-city Plymouth GP, Dr Williams, told me:

“I don't know of a GP at the moment who isn't working at full capacity. We are all working way beyond our contracted hours, late into the evenings, on our 'days off' and at weekends. Not for money, not for glory, but to give our patients the best possible care.

I have colleagues who have burnt out, friends who are burning out, friends who are back at work too soon after serious illness because we are...putting our lives on hold to prop up the job we love and the patients we are passionate about. But the system is failing, and it's feeling like that may be intentional. We believe we are set up to give the most cost effective and best patient care—but maybe that's wrong. Can you give an honest answer about where NHS England see primary care going? Is there an agenda or even a plan in place for change?

It has been said that Plymouth is being watched to see what happens when Primary Care fails. If there is any truth in this please tell us now—don't watch it fail”,

but act to stop that happening. That is a common view among most of the GPs I spoke to. They have a real sense that primary care in Plymouth is being watched by NHS England and other NHS bodies to see what happens when a system falls over. Whether or not that is true, that is the sense they have.

As a result of underfunding, nurse and GP vacancies in Plymouth's primary care sector are hard to fill. If GP practices cannot fill vacancies, the quality of care they can offer suffers as more and more patients chase fewer and fewer available GP appointments. NHS England estimates that one in seven GP posts in Plymouth have not been filled, which is alarming. A GP in Plymouth who recently advertised for a vacancy at their surgery told me that they did not receive a single application. We know that the far south-west has trouble recruiting healthcare professionals at primary, secondary and acute levels. Our peripherality as a region compounds an already extremely difficult recruitment environment for health professionals. I know that the Government have considered support for GP recruitment in Plymouth in recent months, but it has not produced the additional GPs we are looking for. Will the Minister update us on GP recruitment and on what will happen next?

A common theme in feedback from GPs is that funding and pay have decreased while job pressures have increased. If there is not enough funding GP practices cannot recruit enough doctors, nurses, healthcare assistants and other health professionals, receptionists or managers. Everyone therefore works harder, yet many GP surgeries feel they cannot meet patient demands or expectations. An inner-city Plymouth GP, Dr James Boorer, told me yesterday:

“Working in Plymouth is hard. But we are not alone—there are many other practices in similar deprived cities around the country where it is equally difficult. The problem probably stems from systematic under-resourcing of primary care over the last 10 years where demand has increasingly outstripped resource and funding.

This has led to a failure to recruit new GPs and retain others who have left the profession early because it has been so difficult. The challenge is so great that we feel abused by the government who know we are dedicated and will stay until the job is done no matter how hard it gets. But there is a limit—we do break.”

[Luke Pollard]

That sense of getting to the point where they cannot go much further came across from a lot of GPs, and we have witnessed that in the number of practice handbacks across Plymouth. About 15% of Plymouth's population is now covered by non-general medical services primary care, where a contract has been handed back and an emergency provider has stepped in. That should worry the taxpayer as well, because those organisations consume two to three times as much resource as normal primary care. Last year, instead of about £79 per patient, the step-in provider got about £191 per patient. If that is acceptable as a step-in provision, I would like the Minister to look at whether increasing the per patient funding would avoid the need for practices to hand back their contracts. Levelling funding across a city in this respect, rather than adding extra resources to those practices that have handed back their contract, might be a more efficient tool to address the funding crisis and to deal with the emergency situation.

Deprived practices in Plymouth are not the only ones that are underfunded and under-resourced; the crisis is a national one affecting the whole of primary care, but the crisis is crystallising in hotspots, where the funding and resources are more markedly different from elsewhere in the country. It gets tough in those hotspots first, so GPs leave to work in better resourced areas, and it is harder to recruit in those practices when partners retire. This inequality in funding is driving the crisis. Will the Minister reconsider whether levels of deprivation and health need can be taken into account in the funding formula to ensure that inner-city practices are well resourced?

On average, GPs in more deprived areas have a higher workload, with 20% more consultations with patients, who are more likely to have multiple morbidities, with both physical and mental conditions, but they do not necessarily receive the additional funding to address those complex needs. The Care Quality Commission has described primary care in Plymouth as at a "tipping point". It found 15% GP vacancy rates, with several practices having handed back their contracts or at risk of doing so, in some cases owing to recruitment difficulties. It also found that between 25% and 35% of GPs and practice nurses would be retiring in the next five years. I realise that issue is not specific to Plymouth, but it is a trend across primary care that we need to address if we are to continue providing patients with the care they deserve. I should be grateful if the Minister responded to the concerns that those GPs have raised and set out what steps her Department is taking to address GP recruitment and retention, in particular. I think that a lot of GPs will be watching the debate and looking for reassurance that there is light at the end of the tunnel, albeit the route to it may not be an easy one. They are looking for confidence that there is a plan.

In a similar debate in March 2018, I spoke about primary care in Plymouth and the Minister's predecessor, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), agreed to meet to discuss the issue with Plymouth GPs. I spoke to him about it in the Tea Room the other day and, while I realise that the Minister will not be controlling her diary in the same way as she did before being elevated to ministerial office, I should be grateful if she confirmed that she too would be happy to meet Plymouth GPs, so that they can raise their concerns directly with

her about the direction in which primary care in Plymouth is going. I should welcome it if the meeting were with a cross-party delegation, to make sure that the concerns were not party political.

A crisis in primary care means longer waiting times. It means patients will experience longer waits for routine appointments, have trouble getting through on the phone, and face reduced availability of urgent appointments. Healthwatch Plymouth published a report in November about primary care in our city. One patient had this to say about their experience:

"I had a brilliant surgery. But since merging with another I have had problems. I had the flu bug over Christmas, I received a diagnosis of a throat virus over the phone. I waited 7 weeks to see my doctor. Then when the results of my ultrasound came in, I found out from the receptionist that my doctor had retired. I have just tried to make an appointment and have been told I can't make an appointment"—

for many months—

"as they are changing their systems."

I think that is an isolated example, but it is part of a trend of concerns that patients express not only to the patient participation groups in practices—groups of patients who deserve special thanks and who are often overlooked in our debates—but by way of representations in the postbags of councillors and MPs.

The Care Quality Commission found that people could not always access a GP when they needed one and GPs told the CQC that it is not uncommon for the waiting time for a routine appointment to be four weeks. There are even some areas of the city where people are having difficulty registering or cannot register with a GP, because GP surgeries have closed and there is not sufficient bandwidth in the system to accept additional patients. I know that because my GP surgery in Plymouth closed and it was a struggle for the patients to find another with places available.

People in Plymouth have reached out to me on social media, and I have been inviting comments on my Facebook page. It was nice to get comments that were not about the B-word. I will recount a few of those experiences, but should the Minister or officials want to look at them again there are plenty more on my Facebook page. I heard from a pregnant woman who told me she had to wait three weeks for an appointment. Someone else said:

"For months now, it's been impossible to book appointments online at my doctor's. It takes three weeks to see a GP, and two just to see the practice nurse. After becoming part of a merged practice, the surgery has declined drastically."

Another told me:

"Telephone consultations now seem to be the norm. Better than nothing, but a poor substitute for thorough examination."

There is, of course, a growing role for community pharmacy in Plymouth, as there is across the country, and our pharmacists do a superb job. More people need to access services provided by community pharmacists, and I encourage the Minister to continue to promote the services that pharmacies offer as part of the broader array of services to address the primary care crisis.

GPs are on the frontline of healthcare and many people in Plymouth have told me that pressure has increased as community services have been cut back in other areas. A large proportion of the patients that GPs see consists of patients with severe, complex and enduring mental health difficulties who need regular GP support,

and for some their GP is their only point of contact. While GPs continue to go above and beyond for their patients, they are not being given enough help to ease the pressure, particularly with patients with complex needs. Mental health services in Plymouth have significantly longer waiting times than other areas in Devon. Patients struggling with their mental health consult their GPs more frequently, until they are accepted into a specialist service that can support them in appropriate settings. That means that GPs in Plymouth have far more appointment demands to support patients with mental health needs than GPs elsewhere in Devon. At a meeting I held with GPs last year there was general agreement that integration of general practice, mental health and community services would be beneficial and would lead to patient care being not only better but more efficient.

This is a good moment to talk about something that Plymouth is really good at, as well as having challenges: the introduction and roll-out of health and wellbeing hubs. Plymouth City Council, our local clinical commissioning group, and Livewell Southwest—our social enterprise that provides NHS services in Plymouth—have come together to roll out health and wellbeing hubs across our city. Many of them are in the north of Plymouth, which is represented by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), but three weeks ago I attended the opening of an all new wellbeing hub at the Cumberland centre in Devonport in my constituency. Those are genuine attempts to provide wraparound care, in addition to primary care, and to provide more thorough and effective services. I believe that Ministers should roll that model out across the country as it has real benefits. We should listen to our doctors, not just when it comes to our health but about what is best for our health services. They claim that the health and wellbeing hub model is an important addition to GP services, although not a substitute for them.

Plymouth City Council has submitted a bid to Ministers for £13 million funding to create more hubs across the city, including a superhub in our city centre. I have spoken to the Minister of State for Health about that a number of times, and I will be grateful if the Minister looks favourably on that funding application if it crosses her desk, as it is a genuinely pioneering project. The superhub would bring together in one location NHS dentistry and Plymouth's award-winning dental school, sexual health testing, mental health support, social care, and new forms of directly employed general practice doctors, as well as wellbeing services. A site has been identified for those services in the Colin Campbell Court development, and my Labour colleague on the city council, Councillor Mark Lowry, and our health lead, Councillor Ian Tuffin, would jump at the chance to brief the Minister and her officials about that project.

As GP services in the localities continue to close in Plymouth, that project would create a new south pole in Plymouth for health services, as well as the north pole at Derriford Hospital in the northern tip of our city. We all want to discourage people from attending hospital if they can access their care in local communities, and health and wellbeing hubs, as well as the new superhub, could make a transformative difference in Plymouth.

The doctors and patients I have spoken to in Plymouth all agree that our primary care is in crisis, but recognising that there is a crisis is the first step to solving it. The crisis is not because our doctors, nurses and health

professionals are not working hard enough; it is because they need more support and a better system to support them in their work. Dr Boorer said:

“We regularly continue working late into the night, often still doing administrative tasks and checking bloods at 10 to 11 pm, or catching up at weekends so we can meet the needs of our patients. But this level of work is unsustainable as evidenced by practice closures. With the current crisis, related as a result of sustained under resourcing, we see sub-optimal care for patients, burnt out GPs handing back contracts and leaving the profession”.

I praise those GPs who have chosen to work in inner-city practices such as those in my constituency, because they genuinely care about their patients and the quality of care they receive. I am concerned, however, that the current GP partnership model, and the high costs of buying into it, is not sufficient or appropriate for 21st century Britain, especially when we are suffering from a recruitment and retention crisis. We need to attract more younger talent as we seek to replace those GPs who are nearing retirement, and I believe there are ways to flex the model of providing primary care.

Research shows that cities such as Plymouth have been hit hardest by some of the cuts to public services. Levels of deprivation are high, and the wraparound care provided by other providers—in particular council services—is not as present as it used to be. We know that when the primary care system breaks, costs for the taxpayer rise and people suffer. The scale of the challenge we face is great. I genuinely welcome the Minister to her new role. I hope we will be able to work together to address the specific challenges faced by Plymouth, and come up with some solutions.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for securing this important debate and for his kind words. I wish him a very happy birthday.

The hon. Gentleman spoke passionately about his constituency, as he always does, and he raised a number of pressing issues related to GP provision in Plymouth. I join him in thanking GPs and all the 1.3 million dedicated NHS staff for how they coped with increased demand on services over a challenging winter. The Government will continue to give the NHS all the additional support it needs over winter to ensure that patients continue to receive high-quality care.

The Government recognise the vital role primary care plays at the heart of our NHS, but a growing and ageing population, and increasing numbers of patients with long-term conditions, are putting strain on the system and adding to the challenges we face in recruiting and retaining GPs. Those real pressures can affect the quality of care that patients receive. We fully recognise those huge challenges, which is why we have made primary care a clear priority.

I will set out the significant measures that we are taking to support and reinvigorate general practice, which will improve GP services for patients across England, including the hon. Gentleman's constituents. In 2015, we set an ambitious target to recruit 5,000 more GPs. That is challenging, but it is vital to ensure that we have more GPs in the NHS, so we remain committed to delivering that commitment as soon as possible. The NHS long-term plan, which was published in January,

[Seema Kennedy]

made a clear commitment to the future of general practice, with primary and community care set to receive at least £4.5 billion more a year in real terms by 2023-24.

In January, we launched the new five-year GP contract, which was agreed with and widely welcomed by the profession. It will see billions of pounds of extra investment for improved access, expanded services at local practices, and longer appointments for patients who need them. We have listened to GPs about the biggest pressures they face and where we must focus to deliver reform of general practice. GPs have told us that one of the biggest pressures they face is an often unsustainable workload, which is a key reason why many dedicated GPs leave the national health service. Our new GP contract seeks to address the workload pressures that have resulted from a workforce shortfall. NHS England has committed to further expanding community-based multi-disciplinary teams and will provide funding for up to 20,000 other staff, such as physician associates and social prescribers, in primary care networks by 2023-24. Those bigger teams of staff will provide a wider range of care options for patients and free up more time for GPs to focus on their true passion—treating patients.

Another huge cause of concern for GPs has been professional indemnity. In recent years, the spiralling cost of purchasing professional indemnity cover has been a major source of stress and financial burden for GPs. That is why we addressed it in the GP contract and why just last week, on 1 April, we launched the new state-backed clinical negligence scheme for general practice. That brings a permanent solution for indemnity costs and coverage and includes all staff delivering primary medical services, including out of hours. It will remove a huge cause of worry for GPs, which will help with the recruitment and retention of GPs.

As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, we are looking at how to make the general practice partnership model fit for GPs working in the NHS in the 21st century. We recognise the huge contribution that the partnership model has made over the last 70 years of the NHS, but we know that it faces huge challenges, because many GPs, like other NHS doctors, want more flexible and varied portfolio careers; perhaps they do not want the long-term financial and geographical commitments of joining a GP partnership. That is why we commissioned Dr Nigel Watson to lead an independent review of the partnership model to understand those challenges.

As part of that review, Dr Watson visited more than 25 practices around the country, some of them small and some super-partnerships. As the hon. Gentleman alluded to, Dr Watson visited areas that are experiencing the greatest difficulty in recruiting GPs, including meeting some in Plymouth. Those visits played a key role in informing the work of the review, which reported in January and made seven key recommendations about workforce, business models and risk. We are grateful to Dr Watson for his important work, and we will respond to his recommendations in due course, with a view to reinvigorating the partnership model and making it fit for the 21st century.

I have set out that general practice is a priority for the Government, but what does that mean for Plymouth, and the hon. Gentleman's constituents? GPs know the needs of their patients best, which is why the long-term

plan seeks to change the balance of how the NHS works by shifting more activity into primary and community care. That will be enabled by expanding multidisciplinary teams working within general practice.

In Plymouth, the funding linked to the new GP contract will create extra capacity, with a 25% increase in staff numbers expected over the next five years across Devon as primary care networks employ pharmacists, physician assistants, physiotherapists, paramedics and social prescribers. I commend the valuable work being undertaken in Plymouth to open a network of local wellbeing hubs, aimed at giving residents easier and earlier access to health advice and support.

I understand that in a meeting with the former Health Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), there was a specific proposal for funding to develop a hub in Plymouth city centre. I understand that following that discussion the clinical commissioning group has undertaken further work on the case for investment with the local sustainability and transformation partnership, in anticipation of the next capital funding bidding process.

I am encouraged by the number of promising local recruitment schemes that Devon CCG has put in place both to recruit more GPs and to retain those already in the workforce. I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, hopefully along with my hon. Friends the Members for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), and some GPs. Other schemes include investment in portfolio careers for GPs, supported by funding from NHS England; investment in GP coaching to support retention, and a scheme to entice those who have left the primary care workforce to return to the profession, which will launch this year. It will also offer flexible working and alternative employment arrangements.

Luke Pollard: Flexible working is a huge opportunity. May I ask the Minister to look also at whether flexible working schemes with acute hospital trusts, such as part-time GPs and part-time acute hospital doctors, could be included in that scheme? I think there is real merit in that.

Seema Kennedy: I will take that salient point away and write to the hon. Gentleman.

The CCG is also working closely with the Devon Community Education Provider Network and Health Education England to develop primary care training hubs to support GP training, as well as the broader primary care workforce. Furthermore, the targeted enhanced recruitment scheme in England—an initiative that offers a one-off payment of £20,000 to GP trainees for committing to work in a specific area—has offered 24 places in Plymouth from August 2019. I am delighted to tell the House that 22 of the 24 places have been filled ahead of schedule, which is excellent news for Plymouth. It is the second highest number of places for any one area in England.

It is important to note that, despite the difficulties that the hon. Gentleman has raised, primary care in Plymouth is improving. Provision has been reviewed by the local authority's health scrutiny committee regularly over the last five years. Most recently, the committee concluded that it was assured that the system in Plymouth—in particular, general practice—had made

substantial improvements since its last review, and that although the system was fragile, significant work was under way to address recruitment issues.

I hope that I have made it clear what an absolute priority supporting and reinvigorating primary care is for the Government. We know that there are challenges with GP recruitment and retention, and other important issues facing general practice as the hon. Gentleman has outlined. However, the commitments made in the NHS long-term plan and the significant extra funding to back them up mean that we are well placed to address them. We can anticipate real improvement and reform of general practice, ensuring better access and improved services for patients in Plymouth and across England. It is such an exciting time for me as the new Minister responsible for primary care to come in and see those new commitments begin to be put into effect, and to ensure that they are delivered. I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing such an important matter for debate, and I wish him a very happy birthday.

Question put and agreed to.

LGBT Rights: Brunei

4.29 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered LGBT rights in Brunei.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I am glad that so many right hon. and hon. Members have been able to come today, because this is an important topic that is dear to our hearts and those of our constituents.

As Members will know, last week the Sultan of Brunei implemented the third phase of the sharia penal code—the SPC—which was first introduced in 2014. This phase of the code’s implementation licenses brutal executions and violent punishments of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, including death by stoning, effectively just for living their sexual identity. As a result, Brunei is now the eighth country that can punish consensual same-sex relationships with the death penalty. It also punishes women for abortion, which is a health matter, and anyone for sex outside of marriage, which is a private matter.

Last week in the House, the Minister gave a welcome statement about this situation. However, he said that the UK has a “close friendship” with Brunei as a result of our long-standing military and strategic partnerships, which I understand. He also mentioned Brunei’s membership of the Commonwealth. I believe that that relationship gives the UK special responsibility to act against this violation of human rights, which has implications for people both within and beyond Brunei. I will return to that point later.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this vital debate. When I clicked on the Commonwealth’s website this morning, the strapline that came up was “53 countries working together to...celebrate diversity” and to “protect human rights”. Given the situation in Brunei, which, as the hon. Lady says, is appalling, and the fact that same-sex consensual sex is criminalised in 35 of the 53 Commonwealth countries, does she agree that Britain must raise this issue at the forthcoming Commonwealth meeting?

Thangam Debbonaire: I absolutely agree, and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Later in my remarks, I will emphasise that Britain’s position in the Commonwealth gives us a position of leadership that we must act upon. Brunei is only one of the countries that are behaving in an egregious manner towards people because of their sexuality, and I would like us to use our influence.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Last November, I was privileged to visit Rwanda with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, where there are also questions about LGBT legislative equality. Surely the role of the British Government, and the Foreign Office in particular, is to provide challenge within the Commonwealth and to promote the idea that if a country is a member of the Commonwealth, it must advocate the equality legislation that the UK Government and other members of the Commonwealth partake in. It is simply unacceptable

[Chris Elmore]

in 2019 for these barbaric acts to be undertaken against people who are LGBT, purely on the basis of the way they were born.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right, and I would like the Minister to urge his colleague, the Foreign Secretary, to use his position in the Commonwealth. I will return to that issue later.

I will set out the dangers that the penal code poses for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Brunei and outside, and also for other women. I will also identify how I believe Brunei benefits from its association with the UK through military, diplomatic and economic relationships. Finally, I will press the Minister on the ways in which this country can bring its influence to bear on Brunei. I have some specific suggestions for action that I would like him to consider.

First, I thank the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights—particularly Anna—the Brunei Project, the Kaleidoscope Trust, the Human Dignity Trust, Stonewall, ForcesWatch, the House of Commons Library, and others for having provided briefings for this debate. I also thank the parliamentary Digital Engagement Programme, which has brought members of the public into this discussion in a way that I never knew about. Because of that programme, the House of Commons Facebook post on this topic was seen by 35,435 accounts between 5 and 9 April. There were 6,061 post-clicks and 1,275 engagements, including reactions, comments and shares, and the post prompted 20 private messages to that Facebook page. I will refer to some of those comments and suggestions during my speech.

The Government of Brunei, as part of an increasing trend towards religious conservatism, introduced the SPC in 2014. It applies to both Muslims and non-Muslims, although the latter group is exempt from certain sections, and operates in parallel with common law inherited from British rule, which the Bruneian Government have said continues to be the primary means of administering justice. Punishments that came into effect with the implementation of phase 3 of the SPC include death by stoning for adultery, sodomy or extramarital sexual relations by Muslims, public flogging as a punishment for abortion, sex between women or consumption of alcohol, and amputation of limbs for theft. The SPC also criminalises trans people through charges of “indecent” dressing.

Homosexuality was already illegal in Brunei, but the third phase of the SPC increases the sanctions, which are barbaric in themselves. They are punishments for love, for private matters and for health matters, not for anything that any country with a legal framework based on human rights should count as crimes. Last week, the Minister rightly noted that there is an evidential bar, such as requiring four witnesses for some acts, and said that that bar is high and could therefore mean low use, if any, of these punishments. However, there is an alternative, which is confessions, and I am worried that coercion may be used to push people into confessing. For my money, a high evidential bar does not make anything better; the punishment is still on the statute book.

The Brunei Project, a human rights campaign, has stressed the intersectional implications of the SPC, with its attacks on rights to freedom of expression, religion and belief, and noted that the SPC laws also codify discrimination against woman and girls. Human Rights Watch says that the SPC has further implications for women and will make it difficult for Muslim women in particular to escape violent marriages or seek employment opportunities. As I have mentioned, there are also the punishments for abortion and adultery.

Why should the legal system of a far-away country matter to any of us here? Well, both Bristol West and the UK are diverse and home to an international community, including a large student population. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people come to Bristol and the UK from all over the world, and there will be Bristolians who come from, live in or work in Brunei who will be affected by the SPC. They want to see us fight this assault on their rights. Local people with no direct connection to Brunei are also rightly concerned about this erosion of human rights. They, I, and all hon. Members here want a world in which human rights—including those of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people—are respected everywhere.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on making an incredibly powerful speech. Given the problems that some LGBT asylum seekers have recently found in gaining asylum, will she join me in calling on the Minister to raise concerns with the Home Office to ensure that we in this country are granting sanctuary to those LGBT people who face persecution in their home countries?

Thangam Debbonaire: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, I am particularly concerned at this country's record, at the fact that, unfortunately, it often fails to give asylum to people who come here because of persecution due to their sexuality, and at the high evidential bar that seems to be imposed on them. I gather that that is particularly true for women.

The implementation of the SPC has been condemned by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Caucus, so this is not just the west criticising south-east Asia; Brunei is not acting in step with its friends in other south-east Asian nations. I am also pleased to note that, despite things going backward in many parts of the world, India recently repealed section 377 of the Indian penal code, introduced by the British under colonisation, which criminalised sex between people of the same sex.

That is progress, but we need to keep progress and halt backward steps, because if we tolerate them, it signals to other countries that it is fine for them to go backward too. In too many countries, the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are being undermined and fragile gains lost to bigotry and authoritarian chauvinism. As I said, Brunei is now one of several countries where being gay is effectively punishable by death, but there are over 70 countries where it is criminalised.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have had dealings with Brunei for a very long time, in so far as I know the people there. What I do not understand is how anyone as civilised and used to working in the west as the

Sultan and the people around him would even contemplate being so barbaric. That is the big question: why are they doing this stupidity?

Thangam Debbonaire: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am also baffled—why do this? I hope the Foreign Secretary will be able to use the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group later this month as a place to talk openly, frankly, but firmly to the Sultan’s representatives and ask that very question.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. It is outrageous what is going on. Does she agree that the Government should review the deployment of our troops to Brunei?

Thangam Debbonaire: I would certainly like us to use the fact that we have troops in Brunei as a measure of leverage. I understand the strategic position that those troops hold, but it is important that we do not just give troops unconditionally when the nation of Brunei and the Sultan are benefiting from those troops.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Last September, a Defence Minister confirmed to me in a written answer that Brunei’s armed forces had had UK military training during the previous 12 months—2017-18. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should make the case for there being no further military training for Brunei until this issue is resolved?

Thangam Debbonaire: That is certainly a way of using our position of influence. I ask the Minister to consider that, and to talk to his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence about how we are deploying our military, to what purpose and whether that is appropriate given the Brunei state’s attitude towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. I contend that it is not appropriate, and I really would like the Minister to consider talking to his colleagues about that.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. Is she aware of the petition started by my constituent Sarah Quinn, who is a brilliant counterpart of mine in the Scottish Youth Parliament? Her petition calls on the UK Government to do more to use their influence to stop human rights abuses against LGBT people in Brunei. The petition is just 16,000 signatures short of the 100,000 it needs to secure an even longer debate on this subject, so will the hon. Lady encourage others to sign it?

Thangam Debbonaire: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman’s constituent on taking that step. It is great to see such campaigning by young people, and I certainly encourage everyone who watches or hears about this debate to take that sort of action and to show the Government, who I believe agree that this is an egregious breach of human rights, that we want them to take firm action. This is not good enough. An abuse of human rights anywhere is an abuse of human rights for us all; it is an attack on all of us.

As was mentioned, Brunei is a strategic partner of the UK in the region, and we have close military, diplomatic and economic ties. I would like us to make use of those ties as a form of leverage. On military ties, as others mentioned—I will try not to repeat what they

said—the British Army in Brunei comprises an infantry battalion of Gurkhas and an Army Air Corps flight of Bell 212 helicopters. That arrangement has been periodically renewed since 1962 by a series of agreements known today as the Brunei garrison agreement, the most recent of which was signed in 2015 and lasts until 2020. I understand that the Ministry of Defence has already begun discussions about the continuation of that agreement. Will the Minister communicate my hon. Friends’ suggestions to the Ministry of Defence for consideration in negotiations about the future of that agreement?

Since 1997, the garrison in Brunei has been the only remaining British military base in the far east. Obviously, we want to keep our strategic influence there. However, the continued presence of British armed forces in Brunei offers clear defence and security benefits for the Sultan—the Sultan wants us there too. According to the *UK Defence Journal*, Brunei

“sees Britain as its biggest European ally to count on if necessities arise”,

and

“the UK is expected to be prepared to support Brunei against an expansionist China; not mentioning the British role as a political ‘stabiliser’ for the Sultan.”

What can be given can also be taken away, and we can use the possibility of its being taken away. I understand the need for us to have geopolitical influence in the region, but that influence is morally bankrupt if we do not use it for good.

On economic ties, the Institute for Public Policy Research estimates that there are around 6,400 British citizens in Brunei. Around 2,000 are military personnel or civil servants attached to the British Forces Brunei base, but 60% of Brunei’s GDP is derived from oil and natural gas, so many British citizens work for Brunei Shell Petroleum and in related industries and businesses. I am concerned about what is happening to UK citizens in Brunei.

There are also trade links. Neither the UK nor the EU currently has a free trade agreement with Brunei, but Brunei is a member of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, a trade agreement between 11 countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Brunei does not appear to have ratified that agreement yet, but the Department for International Trade is currently consulting on a possible future free trade agreement between the UK and the CPTPP. That is one of four consultations on possible future trade deals happening now, the others being with the US, Australia and New Zealand. The question is how we use our influence. Will the Minister talk to his colleagues in the Department for International Trade about how human rights can and must be integrated into the conditions for trade?

We must ask how we can use our influence not only directly with Brunei but with other nations. This morning, I met activists in UK civil society, who urged thoughtfulness and caution, and asked us to listen to the voices of Brunei civil society—particularly to the voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Brunei. This is difficult, because the voice of civil society is not strong in Brunei, and neither is the voice of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. We will need to do some work to allow it to be heard.

[Thangam Debbonaire]

There has also been a lot of press about boycotting the Dorchester—I am not in a position to boycott something I cannot afford.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that this afternoon the Police Federation has announced that it will boycott the Dorchester for its police bravery awards? Will she join me in congratulating the Police Federation and hoping that other organisations will follow suit?

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend very much for that intervention, because it brings me to my next point. I might not be able to afford to stay at the Dorchester, but I can talk to organisations that use the services of other organisations about how we all make our own decisions about how we spend our money and where we bring our trade and business. I want companies with interests in Brunei to think about their influence, but also, crucially, about the safety of their staff there. I understand concerns about economic boycotts, and I also understand the need for us to have a relationship with Brunei. I do not want Brunei to feel cornered, because dialogue is essential, but I want it to feel encouraged to change its mind and do the right thing.

Friendship has limits. We need to show how we feel when our allies or associates treat their own citizens' human rights, and potentially ours, as optional. I have various things that I want to ask the Minister. I will start with the members of the public who, via the parliamentary digital engagement team's work on the Commons Facebook page, gave various views—this is not a statement of endorsement, but of representation. Their views included taking away the Sultan of Brunei's honours; freezing his assets; boycotting his businesses; suspending Brunei from the commonwealth; guaranteeing assistance and/or asylum to all persecuted lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Bruneians; withdrawing military support; and recalling the British ambassador to Brunei. It would be good for the members of the public who contributed those ideas to have them at least considered by the Minister. Many respondents rightly pointed out that several of Britain's other allies have similarly egregious human rights records, and that Government policy should apply consistently to them, too. Some respondents said that the UK should not interfere with the laws of another country and should focus on its own issues—I represent this, even though I do not agree with such a view.

I would like the Minister to consider diplomatic pressure. What steps have the Government already taken to convince the Sultan of Brunei and his Government to repeal the SPC? What representations have the Minister or his colleagues made on the UK's commitment to securing human rights internationally for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and for women? Have the Government considered the full range of diplomatic sanctions, and if so, can the Minister tell us more about that? What consideration has the Minister made of sanctions or actions against similar regimes with similarly abhorrent legal frameworks?

What contact has the Minister or his colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy had with businesses that have employees or representation in Brunei? What support is being offered to UK citizens

in Brunei? If state sanctions are being considered by this Government, what consultation is being carried out with civil society in Brunei on the impact of those sanctions and how to make them most effective?

I reiterate what I mentioned earlier. Will the Minister ask his colleague the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary—I emphasise the word Commonwealth—to ensure that equality briefings are provided to all attendees at the meeting of the Commonwealth Ministers Action Group in London this month, and to help to give civil society activists a voice at that meeting? Will he ask the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to do everything he can to create a constructive atmosphere for dialogue with Ministers from Brunei, in which the voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are heard?

Chris Elmore: My hon. Friend will obviously be aware that the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting will be held in Kigali in about 18 months' time. Perhaps I could suggest to the Minister that an agenda item on equality and LGBT legislation could be developed for that Commonwealth summit, where Rwanda will take over the chair. While we in the United Kingdom have the chair, this issue should be very much at the top of all the agendas of Commonwealth Ministers.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. [Interruption.] I am hearing a colleague say from a sedentary position that LGBT rights was an agenda item last time, and my concern is that this influence is used as strongly as possible. It feels like we are in danger of going backwards, which is not okay. It is not good enough.

I would also like to refer the Minister to my question from last week, on which I hope he will show me a little patience—I kind of sprung it on him. It is a very techy question, but I hope he might be able to update us. Article 1 of the United Nations convention against torture and other cruel and unusual punishments prohibits the use of intentionally inflicted pain as a form of punishment inflicted by a state action. I think we both agree that that covers this situation. However, the UK has agreed to that convention, so we are also bound by article 3, on refoulement, which means that we should not return, expel or expedite anyone to another country if there are substantial grounds for believing that that person will be in danger of being subjected to such cruel and unusual punishment or torture. What discussions has the Minister had since I raised this matter with him last week with his counterparts in other Departments, such as Justice, about ensuring that we abide by the principle and practice of article 3?

In relation to asylum, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said, there is deep concern among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the UK that the Home Office does not understand the risks that people seeking asylum in the UK face if they are returned to their home countries where they are at risk of persecution because of their sexuality. As chair of the all-party group on refugees, I am concerned that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people report not having their sexuality believed and that officials do not recognise that, while a specific state might be generally safe for heterosexuals, there may be a well-founded fear of persecution for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

The UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group report published in 2018 found that LGBT people face insensitive questioning, that statements from partners and friends are dismissed and, further, that women asylum seekers face even more scrutiny than men. Home Office data show that, of the asylum claims made between 2015 and 2017 based on a fear of persecution because of sexual orientation, only a quarter were approved. What assurances can the Minister give those seeking asylum in the UK from Brunei—or any other country where this applies—for protection from any aspect of the SPC? What discussions has he had with his counterparts in the Home Office about that? Will he undertake to have such discussions?

Finally, the Minister has a crucial role in talking to colleagues across Government on instilling ethics in defence and trade contracts. The maintenance of the defence presence in Brunei is obviously of regional importance, but in this context the British presence in Brunei is also a political statement. Will the Government commit to using their leverage to secure full human rights for LGBT people and women in Brunei as part of the negotiations over the renewal of the garrison agreement?

To conclude, I applied for this debate because, like many hon. Members and members of the public, I am outraged that Brunei has introduced a penal code that sanctions such appalling violence on its people—as well as ours—contrary to international law and a human rights-based framework. I am disappointed, as the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said, that the Sultan has chosen to go down this route. It is not necessary. This is a test for the Commonwealth. Will the Minister ask the Foreign Secretary to ensure that every piece of Commonwealth pressure can be brought to bear on the situation?

Bob Stewart: One thing we cannot know about, but I bet happens, is the influence of our royal family, who I know feel very much as we do and will be outraged. I am quite sure that some of the younger members of the royal family will be having words about this subject.

Thangam Debbonaire: I do not think I can comment on the views of members of the royal family, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I want the UK Government to take a leadership role in the world on the human rights agenda. It is clear to me that the UK Government have a specific role in correcting injustice everywhere. Whether or not we exercise that responsibility will say a great deal about how we want to be seen in the world and by our own lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people here in the UK.

I do not want my lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans constituents, friends or colleagues, or anyone in the UK, to live in fear anywhere. I do not want my country to be complicit in turning a blind eye to state-sanctioned persecution in a nation where we have a military presence and that we would consider to be friend.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Clearly, this is brutality at the very extreme end of the spectrum. However, it should not have to get to that point before we take LGBT rights seriously. My hon. Friend is talking about the UK. The Government are turning a blind eye to LGBT rights here in the UK, by denying the extension of equal marriage rights to Northern Ireland. Surely we have to get our own house in order if we are to be an effective voice on the international stage.

Thangam Debbonaire: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which I agree with, although obviously that is not in the Minister's portfolio. If we are to have true moral authority, we need to make sure that we have equal rights for every one of our citizens, everywhere in the United Kingdom.

I have said what I do not want, but what I want is for my constituents, my friends, my colleagues, and everyone in the UK—every single person, whether they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans, or a different sexuality—to be able to travel and work freely and to enjoy the same rights and freedoms as everybody else. I want lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people to be able to visit countries and take up employment or study opportunities anywhere they want, without having to check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's website to see if it would be safe for them to do so. It does not feel okay that my friends, my staff or my constituents have to check whether it is safe to fall in love, travel with their partner, or live in a way that expresses their true gender identity or sexuality, wherever they choose to live, work or visit.

At this terrible moment for Brunei's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, the UK Government have a responsibility to stand up and be counted. I urge the Minister to do everything in his power to take this opportunity to show the cross-party strength of feeling, which I hope he understands and absorbs, as I believe he does, and show the world that Britain will not tolerate attacks on anyone's human rights—on the human rights of entire sections of the population—simply for being who they are and loving who they love.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. We have about 10 minutes of Back-Bench time before I call the Front-Bench spokespeople: Hannah Bardell for the SNP, Fabian Hamilton for Her Majesty's Opposition, and the Minister. The SNP and the Opposition spokespeople will have five minutes each and the Minister will have 10 minutes, then we will return to Thangam Debbonaire to sum up. Three hon. Members are seeking to contribute, so the time limit will be three minutes each. First, I call Luke Pollard.

4.57 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on a passionate speech. It is not right that our LGBT friends across the world cannot enjoy the same freedoms as LGBT people in my constituency.

We need to send a strong message from this debate that love is love. We must use our power as a country to impress that on our friends. It is harder when our friends fail, and when we have to have difficult conversations with people with whom we share a common bond, but on this we must, because our values do not stop at our borders. I say that as a gay man who is proud to be out. We have an extra responsibility to make sure that people know that whether someone is L, G, B, T or straight, it does not matter—they deserve human rights wherever they are.

I have asked the Ministry of Defence in a written question about what advice has been given to UK forces stationed at British Forces Brunei, to make sure that

[Luke Pollard]

there are no consequences for LGBT serving UK personnel in Brunei. I would be grateful if the Minister could reflect on that in his remarks.

We must be aware that the roll-back of LGBT rights can happen. There is sometimes a belief in the LGBT community that LGBT rights only go one way—that we will only ever get more equal and that our fight for equality is over. That is wrong. It is a false wrapper that we put round ourselves to pretend that we do not have to fight anymore.

It gave me great strength to see the first-time activists protesting outside the Dorchester and other hotels owned by the Sultan of Brunei, because they recognise that their human rights in the UK are affected if human rights for LGBT people around the world are affected. It does matter. Every time there is hate internationally, hate is brought on LGBT communities in our country. It does not take much to find people on social media saying,

“Perhaps Brunei has the right idea”,

or,

“The sultan of Brunei has the right idea of what to do with you Brighton bitches”,

or,

“Brunei has the right idea in dealing with such FILTH.”

The hate engendered in the laws that my hon. Friend spoke so passionately about empowers people who want to divide others and peddle hate in our country. That is why our determination to fight such cruel punishment for simply being LGBT with our friends and allies abroad must be matched by our commitment to do so at home as well. We must be clear that there is no place for this type of hate, either in the UK or around the world. As we decide what type of country we want to be after Brexit, we must ensure that human rights—LGBT rights—are at the heart of our diplomacy.

5 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing the debate and on the passionate case that she made.

It is clear that the situation in Brunei is totally unacceptable in 2019. Fundamental human rights are the business of everyone—all right-thinking people the world over. It is right that this House and the British Government should give a clear view to the Brunei authorities. We have heard that Brunei sees the United Kingdom as its biggest European ally. It is therefore essential that we use that relationship to make it absolutely clear to the Sultan and to the authorities that the introduction of this latest strict sharia penal code does not fit with the 21st century, and with anyone who believes that basic human rights across the world are rights for all humanity.

The UK and many other countries have made real progress on LGBT rights and equalities in recent decades. It is essential that we send a clear message to any country looking to regress on LGBT or human rights issues that that is unacceptable. We will not go backwards. The decision to impose the death penalty on gay people living in Brunei is utterly barbaric and a violation of

basic human rights. The UK Government must show global leadership, and consider Brunei’s suspension from the Commonwealth if it does not reconsider the decision.

We have heard that the British Army has a presence in Brunei—its only presence in the far east—comprising an infantry battalion of Gurkhas and an Army Air Corps flight. As we know, the current agreement will last until 2020. Of the 6,400 British citizens in Brunei, around 2,000 are members of the armed forces or the civil service at the British forces base. It is understood that the Sultan, understandably, values that British Army presence.

In the light of our important defence and security partnership with Brunei, it is vital that the Defence Secretary demonstrates his commitment to human rights by urging the Brunei authorities to drop this appalling law without delay. We must also ensure that no British troops are affected by the law. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out what specific action the Government have taken in that regard, and whether he will raise the matter with the Defence Secretary.

Furthermore, the Government should commit to stripping the Sultan of Brunei of his honorary appointments as Air Chief Marshal of the Royal Air Force and Admiral of the Royal Navy. It is simply unacceptable for those honours to be held by someone who wishes to abuse fundamental rights in that way. This shameful and regressive move simply cannot be tolerated, and that message needs to go out loud and clear. At the very least, we need assurances from the Government that protections are in place for British military personnel, other British persons living and working in Brunei, and tourists.

Over and above that, such treatment is simply unacceptable for any human being. From a human rights perspective, that is the message that this country and Her Majesty’s Government need to say loud and clear. I hope that the Minister can give some assurances on this issue today.

5.3 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Of course all right-thinking people will condemn what has been introduced in Brunei in recent weeks. We would condemn the stoning of anybody, whether they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or whatever. It is a positively inhumane way of undertaking what they pretend is a form of justice.

However, we in the United Kingdom have a share of the blame for what has happened in the Commonwealth and around the world. The countries with some of the worst records on LGBT rights once owed their allegiance to the Crown here. Sometimes we exported the most draconian laws that any country has ever had on male homosexuality, in particular between 1922 and 1967.

Some people point the finger at religion. Sometimes that is right, but sometimes it is wrong. Interestingly, when the House of Commons tried to legislate to ban lesbianism in 1922 the best speech given in Parliament to strike the law down was from the Archbishop of Canterbury, who said that it was a pile of nonsense. He was quite right. When it came to the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in this country in 1967, Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was one of the best proponents for a humane and sensible approach to those matters.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) is right that it often feels as if we are taking steps backwards. We have taken so many strides forwards in this country in recent years, with civil partnerships, gay marriage and all the rest, that it is all too easy to forget that the most liberal city in the world in the last 150 years was probably Berlin in 1930. In 1934, Hitler killed all the gay Nazis, and went on to put thousands of people in concentration camps and kill them.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) said earlier, we have to put our own house in order in Northern Ireland and the British Overseas Territories, as do so many countries with which we do business. It is ironic that the Sultan of Brunei owns the Dorchester, because that was where Victor Cazalet—a gay man who was a Member of this House in the 1930s, and director of the Dorchester—used to interview everybody for his almost entirely gay, queer or nearly queer searchlight battery in the second world war. I have also been to many dinners at the Dorchester that were hosted by Stonewall.

I am absolutely delighted that people—particularly young people—are taking action, because they want to see that the campaigns of yesteryear are not forgotten and because human rights are a seamless garment that have to be fought for by every single generation. In truth, the laws in Brunei will not stop anyone from being homosexual. They will not stop anybody from loving another person of the same gender. All that they will do is condemn them to a life of loneliness, sadness, lying and hypocrisy.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. We can squeeze in one more short contribution of 90 seconds from Richard Graham.

5.6 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Hollobone. This is a good debate that follows both Foreign Office Questions and the statement by the Minister last week. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on raising the issue, about which many around the House and around the country will feel the same way.

I want to make two points, if I may. The Commonwealth charter itself is very clear about the requirements on Commonwealth members to oppose all forms of discrimination. In 2018 at CHOGM, the Prime Minister was clear about the importance that nobody faces discrimination or persecution because of whom they love. I suspect that the amount of strong opposition to the sharia penal code that has been implemented in Brunei will come as a surprise to the population of that country—an ally and friend of ours—because they will not have anticipated the stream of condemnation that has come their way.

I ask the Minister whether we can, in a sense, help to guide the Kingdom of Brunei through what is a very difficult situation for our relationship with it. Can we encourage it to look carefully at means of reassuring its own citizens, as well as others around the world, that this is not a change in the fundamentally tolerant approach that is characteristic of that country for all of us who

have been? Can we encourage Brunei to do whatever possible to mitigate the introduction of the last part of the sharia penal code?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front Benches. I call Hannah Bardell for the SNP.

5.8 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this debate and on her excellent speech.

It is a sad fact—and not one that is in the infamous guide to coming out—that when someone comes out, they look at the world map in a very different way. That is largely to find out whether the country that they are visiting on business or on holiday is going to arrest, torture or murder them just because of who they love or who they are. As we have heard, Brunei's strict legal code mandates for death for adultery and sex between men, lashes for lesbian sex and amputation for crimes such as theft. It discriminates not just against LGBT people, but against women particularly.

That has sparked a tide of condemnation. We in the SNP have unequivocally condemned Brunei's actions. My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) spoke about the grassroots response, his constituent Sarah Quinn—a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament—and the number of signatures that her petition has gathered. At the weekend, we saw people outside some of the hotels owned by the Sultan.

To my mind that is not enough, because until this shameful announcement, 70 countries criminalised same-sex activity between consenting adults. That accounts for almost 3 billion people, or 40% of the world's population, living in countries that have anti-LGBT laws. Although, unfortunately, the shambles of Brexit is diminishing the UK's soft power, it still has significant power and I know that the Minister has made strong statements of condemnation. However, he and the Government have also recently visited Brunei.

In August 2018 the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) visited as trade envoy to Brunei, Thailand and Burma. He talked about what a successful visit it was, and about the great insight that it gave him into the significant opportunities that already exist within Brunei's economy. I hope that the Minister can give us some comfort and a sense that he will use his power to make sure a strong message is sent. Whatever happens with Brexit the UK will be flailing around potentially looking for trade deals, and they cannot come at the cost of our values.

Richard Graham: It is interesting that since the CHOGM of last year two countries in the Commonwealth have changed their legal position on decriminalising homosexuality, including India, which means that in that great country of more than 1 billion people it is now perfectly legal. Does the hon. Lady agree that some progress is being made?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely do agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is hugely important. We must be in no doubt that we have the opportunity to bring about change and exert influence. The hon. Member for Bristol West spoke of specific things that we could do: freezing assets,

[*Hannah Bardell*]

recovering honours, recalling ambassadors and suspending Brunei from the Commonwealth. I endorse that. When I heard the news I felt sick to my stomach, and I am sure that we all did. I visited Malawi recently, where the Government turn a blind eye to homosexuality, but where if someone is trans they literally do not exist. There must be changes in those countries and we must do everything we can.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend mentions the Commonwealth and the possible remedy of suspension. Of course no country has ever been expelled but countries have been suspended for violation of democracy and the rule of law. Does she agree that what has happened in Brunei is every bit as serious as that and that we must keep suspension or expulsion from the Commonwealth up our sleeve as the ultimate sanction?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree. In the brief time I have left I want to refer to countries such as Qatar, which, in my view, have illegally been awarded major sporting championships. Qatar will host the World cup. Scotland will not be in the men's World cup. England will. What kind of message would it send if England decided to take a stand and say "We are not going to that country and that competition"? It is a difficult decision to take and there is a balance of judgment, but until we stop allowing countries such as Qatar, Brunei and Russia to hold major sporting competitions they will continue to abuse their people and their human rights, and it is time we took a stronger stand.

5.13 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on bringing this debate to us today, and I thank my colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), and the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for their excellent contributions.

Brunei is a country with a population of 420,000 people and is by some estimates the fourth richest country per capita in the world. It has been fully independent of the United Kingdom only since 1984. Its ruler, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, is an absolute monarch and rules absolutely; he is also the country's Prime Minister. This year Brunei became the first east Asian country to adopt strict sharia law. As we have heard today, those laws violate international human rights including the right to life and freedom from torture. They violate certain conventions to which Brunei is a party, including the conventions on the rights of the child. Under international human rights law, corporal punishment in all its forms, such as stoning, amputation or whipping, constitutes torture or other "cruel, inhuman or degrading...punishment", which is prohibited in all circumstances. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, stated recently:

"Any religion-based legislation must not violate human rights, including the rights of those belonging to the majority religion, as well as of religious minorities and non-believers".

Brunei has not executed anyone since 1957, but it has now become one of only seven countries in the world that punish consensual homosexual acts with the

death penalty. We know that these new laws target some of the most vulnerable people in Brunei society. They also place restrictions on Muslim women who want to escape violent marriages.

The UK and Brunei have historically long ties; in 1888 Brunei became a British protected state and it was the only Malay state that chose to remain so in 1963, only gaining independence in 1984. The British Army has maintained a Gurkha battalion—currently about 2,000 personnel—in Brunei since 1962, and as we know, Brunei is a member of the Commonwealth. Commonwealth Secretary-General Baroness Patricia Scotland stated recently that the new laws

"will potentially bring into effect cruel and inhuman punishments which contravene international human rights law and standards".

The Government have stated that they have a good relationship with Brunei, which allows them to have "frank conversations"—a term often used in circumstances such as this—but has not called for Brunei to be suspended from the Commonwealth. The Government have said that

"threatening to kick countries out of the Commonwealth"

is not the "best way" to encourage Brunei to uphold its human rights obligations. I ask the Minister: why not? The scale and brutality of this attack on universal human rights by a friend and close ally of this country should not be without consequence. What action do the Government intend to take to persuade the Sultan of Brunei to rescind these laws, which are an attack on those who only wish to express their love for another human being? What can the Government do to ensure that half the population of that country, its women, do not have to put up with further suffering under the law simply because of their gender—especially those women who are trying to escape violent marriages?

Human rights are universal; Labour Members and, I am sure, every Member of the House of Commons and House of Lords believe that human rights are indivisible. We must ensure that, as a nation with an important and influential place in the world, we uphold those rights wherever they are challenged in today's world. I hope the Minister can answer some of these questions.

5.17 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): It is a pleasure to be here. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this important debate. She is always a passionate advocate for equal rights, and I pay tribute to her commitment on the issue. I am also grateful for the widespread interest and the insights of other hon. Members.

To begin, I think it is worth reiterating what I said in my statement only six days ago. The Government

"oppose the death penalty in all circumstances and in all forms, and we do not believe that amputation or stoning are legitimate or acceptable punishments. Indeed, we consider them to be illegal under international human rights laws relating to torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment."

We also

"consider it appalling that, in the 21st century, people anywhere are still facing potential persecution and discrimination because of who they are and whom they love."—[*Official Report*, 4 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 1274.]

As a number of hon. Members have pointed out, human rights are universal and should apply equally to everyone.

LGBT people are not asking for special rights; they simply expect to be accorded the same dignity, respect and rights as all other citizens. That is why the UK strongly supports, defends and champions the rights of LGBT people here in the UK and all around the world, and opposes the criminalisation of homosexual relationships worldwide, whether in Brunei or elsewhere. As has been pointed out, there are still some 70 countries worldwide that discriminate against any person based on their sexuality, and we continue to encourage all those countries to repeal their laws. There has been some progress since 2015, with five countries decriminalising homosexual relationships, but we all accept that there is more still to do.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, because I want to try to answer as many of the points as I can.

The introduction of the sharia penal code and hudud punishments in Brunei will have an even more discriminatory and intimidating impact on those who are LGBT there. That is something that we cannot accept and that we believe is in contravention of Brunei's international commitments to respect human rights and individual freedoms. We have expressed our concerns to the Government of Brunei. I personally raised the matter when I was there last summer, because we saw this car crash coming. To be fair, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and others have pointed out, the pure weight of international opinion that has come out over the past week has surprised many within Brunei, and particularly within the court of the Sultan.

The day after the measures came into force on 3 April, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary called Brunei's Foreign Minister, Dato Erywan, to reiterate our very deep concern. The Foreign Secretary, our high commissioner, Richard Lindsay, and I have heard explanations, first, that common law will continue to be the primary means of administering justice and, secondly, that the burden of proof under the sharia penal code is almost unattainably high—although I take on board the comments by the hon. Member for Bristol West about confessions.

Although those explanations provide a very small degree of reassurance, none of us, of course, accepts that they go anything like far enough. The fact remains that homosexual relationships will be illegal in Brunei, whether under common law or under the sharia penal code. We remain clear that homosexuality should not be illegal anywhere in the world, and that any form of punishment—particularly the abhorrent hudud punishments—is unacceptable.

The UK will remain committed to the principle of non-discrimination on any grounds, including sexual orientation, gender and identity. We are a party to the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and a signatory to the UN convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment. To answer the hon. Lady, I understand that Brunei plans to expedite its ratification of UNCAT. That is welcome, but what has happened with this code is, of course, directly in opposition to it. I will come to that towards the end of my speech.

As has rightly been said, these are universal issues, but it is worth pointing out the position of British nationals, who are obviously impacted to a large extent. As I assured the House last week, we have taken positive action to inform and support British nationals in Brunei, whether they are visitors, residents or among the garrison. We have updated our travel advice to ensure that British nationals are aware of both the introduction of the sharia penal code and all its potential, albeit unlikely, implications.

On military personnel, I will obviously ensure that this speech is passed on to the Defence Secretary.

Martin Docherty-Hughes *rose*—

Mark Field: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, as I always do.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he is, as always, very courteous. He will know that British Forces Brunei was agreed on the premise that Brunei was seen as a moderate front against extremist ideology. Is that still the case?

Mark Field: Yes, it is, obviously, in counter-terrorism and other areas. The most disappointing thing for me and, I know, for my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester, who is also a regular in Brunei, is the contrast between what we see on the ground—a peaceful, peace-loving people and a state that runs in a very patrician way, as we might imagine given that only 350,000 people live there—and the idea of hudud punishments and the enactment of a sharia penal code. Those things seem entirely at odds with each other, but we are working with Brunei on the grounds the hon. Gentleman points out.

The garrison is the UK's only permanent military presence in the Asia-Pacific. I should point out that a vast amount of the expense of the garrison is met by the Sultan of Brunei, who has always been eternally grateful for our intervention in Borneo in 1962. The garrison provides unique influence and insight—not just for us but for Brunei—in a region of growing strategic importance, and enables vital training for UK forces, supporting our deployments and allies. We have ensured that the necessary protections are in place for personnel based in Brunei, but we would look for that to apply more generally.

A number of hon. Members and others outside this place have asked whether the Commonwealth should take action and whether there should be economic or trade boycotts. The FCO's approach to both is the same: we believe that our concerns are best addressed not through blacklisting or boycotts but through persistent dialogue, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) will recognise, and through diplomacy.

Brunei is one of several Commonwealth member states that criminalise homosexual relationships and retain corporal or capital punishments. We will continue relentlessly to try to encourage each of those countries to amend and suspend those forms of punishment. There has been progress, but I accept that many would like to see much quicker progress. In many ways, what is disappointing about this issue in Brunei is that the implementation of such a code is a backward rather than a forward step.

[Mark Field]

My noble Friend the Minister for the Commonwealth has spoken in detail about this issue to the secretary-general of the Commonwealth, who I understand is presently in contact with the Government of Brunei, expressing the deep concerns raised by the international community over the past 10 days. We stand ready to support any Commonwealth member wanting to reform legislation that discriminates against the LGBT community, women and other parts of society. Significant work is ongoing in a number of states where we hope that there will be progress.

The hon. Member for Bristol West asked me to do my homework from six days ago in relation to article 3 of UNCAT. Under UK law, extradition cannot take place where the death penalty is a possibility, unless a satisfactory assurance has been received that the death penalty will not be imposed or carried out.

Hannah Bardell *rose*—

Mark Field: No, I really am running out of time.

The UK Government remain committed to delivering an asylum system that is sensitive and responsive to all forms of persecution, including those based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and that supports claimants in providing all information relevant to their claim in order to facilitate fair and sustainable asylum decisions. We ensure that claimants are given every opportunity to disclose information relevant to their claim before a decision is taken, including where that information may be sensitive or difficult to disclose. Those who need international protection should always, of course, claim asylum in the first safe country that they reach.

The introduction of extreme hudud punishments in Brunei has understandably caused genuine concern, alarm and consternation in this country and elsewhere. It has also caused concern and uncertainty in Brunei, particularly among residents who are from the UK or are other non-Bruneian nationals. We are a friend of Brunei—I am proud to say that even at this time. Many Members will understand that it is easy to criticise Ministers for talking in such terms, but we have to work closely with our friends. We have expressed, and should continue to express, deep concerns candidly and openly.

We remain deeply troubled by the potential impact of the sharia penal code. Therefore, the Government, our high commissioner and I will continue to guide, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester said, the Government of Brunei to take all necessary steps to reassure its own people, the United Kingdom and the

wider international community that it is fully committed to allowing all citizens and residents to live with dignity and free from discrimination or persecution.

The Foreign Secretary and I will reiterate that point when we meet the Bruneian Foreign and Finance Ministers, who are in London tomorrow. We will emphasise that this issue will not just blow over, and we will stress our ongoing concerns and the need for Brunei to provide public assurances. I shall also pass on the very heartfelt views that we have expressed in the House today.

I thank you, Mr Hollobone, for your indulgence in allowing me these additional few seconds.

5.27 pm

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate verbally or by being present in support. I also thank the Front-Bench spokespeople and the Minister, who responded to some of my points, for which I am grateful, although he should expect a strongly worded letter from me. I would like to know more about what happens when he and his colleague meet ministerial colleagues from Brunei tomorrow. I will also write to him with a list of everything that was raised in the debate to ask if he could respond, because I understand that that is not always possible in so short a debate.

The Minister mentioned friendship. If a friend of mine suddenly decided that it was okay to torture gay people, I would have to talk to them about the nature of friendship, whether they valued my friendship and what price that friendship had for them. I would like the Minister to take that sentiment away. I understand friendship, but we have to be more than just a critical friend who expresses concern; we need to move beyond expressions of concern and outrage to actual action. I want him to understand the strong feeling in the Chamber and beyond the House, and that I speak for an awful lot of people when I say that we do not just want expressions of concern or warm words, welcome though they may be. We want action.

I urge the Minister to take that metaphor of friendship away with him and to think about what he would do if a friend of his was threatening to stone gay people. He would want to know that his friendship mattered more, and he would want to use that friendship as a position of influence. I thank all hon. Members for participating.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered LGBT rights in Brunei.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 11 April 2019

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Retail Crime

1.30 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered prevention of retail crime.

I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Robertson. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for coming to this important debate against much competition on a busy day, with the Prime Minister shortly to speak in the main Chamber. I wish to put on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, and to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for sponsoring it.

I also wish to put on record my thanks to the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—USDAW—the British Retail Consortium, the Association of Convenience Stores, the National Federation of Retail Newsagents, the Co-op Group, and the Co-operative party for working collaboratively with me on the debate, and for raising this important issue with the Government over the last few weeks and months. Today, I will focus on two key issues: shop theft and, in particular, violence and aggressive behaviour towards shop staff.

I think it will help the House if I begin by giving a flavour of the concerns in the community about how those issues are perceived. There is a range of ways in which we can look at this matter, but I will begin by quoting the British Retail Consortium, which is the trade body for major retailers across the country. The consortium does its own annual survey on retail crime and retail concerns, and its 2018 annual survey showed some key figures that are worth sharing. There were a staggering 42,000 incidents of violence against shop staff in the United Kingdom in the last 12 months; that is 115 a day—11,615 so far this year.

Customer theft, just from BRC members, equates to £636 million in one year—£1.7 million a day. Remember, Mr Robertson, that you, I and every member of society pay those additional costs on the goods that we purchase in store. Fraud costs around £163 million a year. Robbery—the more serious end of shop theft—costs around £15 million a year, as does burglary, and criminal damage to shops costs around £3.4 million.

Those are just the figures from the BRC. The Health and Safety Executive's crime survey for England and Wales shows a reported 642,000 incidents of violence at work, including many of the issues that we will address today. USDAW, of which I am a proud member, as well as chair of the USDAW group of MPs, does an annual survey of violence and abuse against retail staff. Last year, USDAW surveyed some 6,725 members of staff, 64% of whom said that they had experienced verbal abuse when serving in a store and 40% of whom said that they had been threatened by a customer when serving in a store. Furthermore, USDAW assessed that an average of 280 shop workers are assaulted every day.

One important issue, which I will ask the Minister to focus on, is the triggers of violence and threats to shop staff. USDAW identified that the top triggers are shop theft itself, in terms of apprehending people who are stealing, and critically—I hope the Minister will focus on this in the longer term as well as today—the enforcement of age-related sales. If a member of the public comes in to buy alcohol, they have to be 18; there are also age restrictions on cigarette sales.

I raised age-related sales of knives and acids with the Minister during consideration of the Offensive Weapons Bill, because the legislation was making it an offence. It is not the police, trading standards or the Minister who will uphold the legislation on the frontline; it is the members of staff who face a customer seeking those products. In 22% of cases, age-restricted sales triggered violence, and in 21% of cases, the sale of alcohol triggered violence.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I apologise for missing the very start of my right hon. Friend's contribution. I have been told by a number of representatives of shops and supermarkets that when shoplifting takes place and is reported to the police, quite often the police are not really interested, and it is down to the shop staff to try to recover the goods. If that message gets out, the problem of shoplifting will only grow.

David Hanson: My right hon. Friend anticipates a later section of my initial contribution, which will be about the police response. I will come to that in due course, but it is a critical point. If shop theft takes place—if a member of staff at the local Co-op sees somebody stealing a bottle of vodka and they say, "Please put that back", that is one of the major triggers for the shoplifter to engage in verbal abuse or violence.

I have talked about USDAW and the BRC. The Association of Convenience Stores represents some 22,000 shops, the smaller stores that are in every town, village and community in the United Kingdom. It has identified that for those 22,000-plus shops, the cost of retail crime equates to £246 million per year, or £5,308 per store. Critically, that means a crime tax of 7p in the pound on the price that you and I, Mr Robertson, pay for goods. That cost comes from the loss of goods through theft and from the information that has to be provided, through CCTV cameras and in other ways, to prevent those thefts in the first place.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he share my concern about how reductions in the police service have affected response times and confidence in the police? The Central England Co-operative has suffered 18 armed robberies, and its staff are very concerned about how vulnerable not knowing whether the police will turn up for some crimes makes them feel. Clearly, the police will turn up for armed robberies, but there are a great deal of threats and violence against our shop workers.

David Hanson: Given my hon. Friend's contribution, and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), I will skip a couple of paragraphs in my speech and return to my planned order later.

[David Hanson]

These rises and these concerns come against a background of reduced police numbers. In 2009-10, I had the great honour of being police Minister for the Labour Government, and when I held that post, the Home Office had 20,000 more police officers than it currently does. That has real impacts: on neighbourhood reassurance first and foremost, and secondly on visibility, but it also has an impact on response times. Obviously, people will respond to higher-level incidents, such as armed robberies—we had one in my constituency, in Flint, only this time last week. Police will respond to those incidents.

However, turning to the Government's response to incidents of retail theft through the police forces, I will quote John Apter, chairman of the Police Federation. He has acknowledged that shoplifting is not a priority crime for stretched forces; he has said that

“as forces struggle to meet 999-call demand, incidents such as these are increasingly likely not to be attended by officers at all which, as a serving police constable with 26 years' service, I find quite shocking.”

That backs up the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) just made. Thames Valley police has informed its local shops that it will not send officers out to deal with shoplifters who steal less than £100-worth of goods. I do not think that is acceptable, and I do not think that the Home Office believes it is acceptable. In due course, I will return to address that issue in detail, but it is a point that has been raised, so it is important that we discuss it now.

Given what the Association of Convenience Stores has said, what do other people think about this? Let me put some quotes on the table. Paddy Lillis, general secretary of USDAW—the shop workers' union—has said:

“The idea that shoplifting is a victimless crime is wrong. Theft from shops is often a trigger for violence, threats and abuse against shopworkers. The rising trend in shoplifting is extremely worrying”

for his members. Mike Mitchelson, president of the National Federation of Retail Newsagents—one of whose members was murdered in the past month, in a shop in Pinner in north London, because of the type of violence that we are discussing—has said:

“Across the country we are suffering from increasing levels of verbal and physical abuse and it's important that the full nature...of the problem is understood.”

Helen Dickinson, chief executive of the BRC, said:

“Violence against employees remains one of the most pressing issues retailers face,”

yet its crime survey once again shows

“an increase in the overall number of incidents.”

James Lowman, chief executive of the ACS said:

“The financial implications of crime are clearly damaging for” local shops, but their urgent priority is tackling “the impact of violence, abuse and aggression on people working in”

communities. He said that “there is no excuse” for that abuse, and it must be stopped.

The Co-op Group retail chief executive has said that nothing is more important than colleagues' safety. As a result, it has spent £70 million in the last three years on

innovative security, crime prevention and colleague safety measures. However, it is clear to the Co-op that it needs support from the police, the judiciary and Parliament to make sure violence against retail workers is not tolerated.

We should be concerned not just about shop theft; violence and abuse against staff working in shops is simply unacceptable, and the Government must address it. The rise in theft is going hand in hand with violence.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is very important that we also recognise that those shops provide vital services in our communities and on our high streets, which are under a lot of pressure. We as a society have to support businesses and individuals who contribute to our local economies at a time when there is a lot of concern about the future of the communities in which we live.

David Hanson: The vast majority of the convenience stores and local newsagents that have been referred to in the correspondence and representations I have had are one or two-person businesses, or businesses with very few staff. They also have a social function, because they keep an eye on their neighbours. If a person turns up for a bottle of milk every morning and does not on Thursday and Friday, there will be a trigger. The increase in violence and shoplifting is not acceptable, and it is driving a culture that I know the Minister abhors. The turnout in this Chamber shows that there is great concern about it. We must deal with it.

As I said earlier, that rise has happened against the backdrop of a reduction in police numbers and the response to retail theft. A key issue is that many lower-level shop theft incidents—I am not minimising their effect; I mean that they are not armed-robbery level—are fuelled by drug and alcohol addiction. The ACS said:

“Retailers perceive that 50% of the repeat offenders into shops are motivated by a drug or alcohol addiction”.

The three products targeted most by thieves in ACS stores are alcohol because it is alcohol, meat because it is expensive, and confectionary because it is the sort of thing that can be sold quickly on the streets to fuel drug or alcohol issues.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. I know how much he cares about this issue. Many Members will know that, in a previous life, I was a trainee butcher in Tesco for many years. That is where I did all my butchery training. On low-level abuse, one of the things that is not highlighted enough is that this is not just about robbery or abuse; it is also about the customers who come into the store. I remember vividly when I worked on counters that if we did not have a particular type of stock, the customers would feel free to scream abuse at us. There was no response to that; we simply had to take it. I now know that lots of retailers are developing safety training to counter the abuse that staff face and training on how to deal with aggressive customers. It is a sign of the times that more and more staff face abuse because people are having a bad day and cannot get the goods that they want. That cannot be allowed to carry on, particularly given that those people provide key services and are there to do a job. I have friends who still work in the industry and feel that they cannot stay because of the abuse that they receive.

David Hanson: My hon. Friend backs up my point strongly. It is simply not acceptable that people who are doing their jobs are abused. Ultimately, I want to look at age-related sales, because when the Government determine that the sale of certain goods and services should be restricted for a range of reasons, it is the shop staff who must enforce that.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I apologise for not being able to stay for the whole debate. Like my right hon. Friend, I am proud to be an USDAW member, and I very much welcome the debate. He is right to highlight the theft of high-value goods, which is sometimes related to addiction and sometimes—particularly in the case of women offenders—results from coercion by others to obtain goods that can be sold for those coercive partners to benefit from. Does he agree that it would be well worth the Minister's while to look at the initiative undertaken in Manchester, where women caught shoplifting in such circumstances are diverted not to the criminal justice system per se, but to women's centres? Good, preventive work can be done there to deal with addiction, domestic abuse, coercion and other causes of this kind of retail crime committed by violent and dangerous offenders, and also some vulnerable offenders.

David Hanson: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. I will talk about the four or five solutions in a moment, but the outcome of this should not necessarily be putting more people in prison. It might actually be trying to deal with the causes of people committing offences in the first place. That scheme in Manchester is a good example of how that could be integrated, and maybe, with good practice, developed still further.

That brings me on to the question of drug and alcohol treatment orders. If, as the ACS says, 50% of repeat offenders are motivated by drug or alcohol addiction, the key is to stop the drug or alcohol addiction. The figures for community order starts for people who have been caught, convicted and given a community order show that, in 2014, which was well into the Government's term of office, 8,734 drug treatment orders and 5,547 alcohol treatment orders were given. However, the figures last year were only 4,889 drug treatment orders—halved—and only 3,315 alcohol treatment orders, which were down by at least a third.

If I go back—dare I say it, it is a long time now, but it is still worth going back to—to the last years of the last Labour Government, in 2007-08, we gave 16,607 drug treatment orders, which is double what we had in 2014 and four times more than now. I simply say that one way we can support people is by identifying why they steal alcohol or other products for their own use. They are doing it to sell them quickly, or to satisfy their cravings. We have to have alternatives, such as that in Manchester, and drug and alcohol treatment orders, which also help.

Finally on the picture of where we are is the threshold for low-level shoplifting. As shadow Minister, I dealt with this issue in Parliament five years ago when the Government introduced a £200 threshold for low-level shoplifting under section 22A of the Magistrates' Court Act 1980, which means that people do not go to court for thefts of goods valued at up to £200. That in itself is fine, because if they are caught that might be dealt with by post.

However, this is five years on. The concern expressed to me from both outside and inside Parliament is that that has been seen as decriminalising shop thefts of under £200. That leads to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton made about police not attending, which leads to magistrates not taking cases in front of court, which leads to offenders thinking that they can get away with it. I simply say that we should look at that in detail and review this, now that we are five years on.

Jim McMahon: My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. To complete that picture, I visited a local Co-op store in my constituency, and the feedback was absolutely about drug and alcohol issues, but also that staff noticed a significant rise in people who just had no money, perhaps from universal credit delays; several women were caught stealing sanitary products, baby milk and nappies. It is absolutely right to point that out, but there are bigger issues in society that drive some of this that also need to be addressed.

David Hanson: I accept that, but we have to be careful not to equate poverty with shop theft. There are many people who have honour in themselves and will not commit crimes. However, I understand and accept that desperation can lead people to do things that they would not in perhaps more economically improved circumstances.

That background leads us to ask what we can do about this situation. I know that the Minister is engaged on this issue, and I give her credit. I moved amendments to the Offensive Weapons Bill to make age-related sales an aggravated offence. We discussed those matters formally in the Chamber, and we have discussed them informally. The amendments were withdrawn on the basis that the Minister would look seriously at the issue. I am pleased to say she had a roundtable, which I went to, as did all the parties I mentioned earlier—the retail organisations, the Co-operative Group and USDAW—so that solutions could be aired.

A helpful letter of 5 April that I had from the Minister indicates—I thank her for this—that she has now undertaken a 12-week consultation on issues including violence and age-related sales, prevention and support, the role of the criminal justice system and best practice. I urge Members and organisations to respond to it. I think that the Minister will find there is a unified voice, and that the solutions are clear to all. The challenge for the Minister will be to take them forward. She has supported an additional £50,000 of Home Office funding to the ACS, for running communications campaigns. She has looked at publishing impact statements for business, and is working with the police to develop guidance. That is all welcome.

I want to conclude with my six asks for the Minister. She looks worried. Some of them are things she will already be aware of. I started my speech by setting out what the BRC, the ACS and USDAW thought the level of attacks and violence against staff to be. I want first to ask the Minister to bring that together, so that we can identify retail crimes, their incidence, and the overall level. All those organisations, the newsagents and the ACS and USDAW, are acting individually and not as part of a formal Government response. They indicate that there is a great deal of under-reporting to the

[David Hanson]

police because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton said, the police may not be able to respond owing to their lack of numbers. Also there is a question about what the scale of the problem is. As I quoted Paddy Lillis saying earlier, the crime is not victimless. People who are threatened in shops are traumatised. People who are injured in shops go home and have days off sick. People go to their doctor and fear coming back to work. Shops have to increase security. It is not a victimless crime. We must bring a record of the whole matter together, and the Home Office is a key part of that, in conjunction with Police Scotland—I see my Scottish colleagues are here for the debate—and the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Secondly—this will come out of the consultation, but I must mention it now—the Government should consider legislating for an aggravated offence with respect, in particular, to age-related sales and abuse of shop staff. We have tested that through the Offensive Weapons Bill and it is part of the consultation discussions. I want the Government to do it, because in addition to the traumatic experiences I have mentioned, and the potential for long-term injury and for people to lose their jobs because of assaults, staff who are required to enforce the law are the frontline, and the Home Office must back them up.

Current sentencing is complicated. The sentencing guidelines for all kinds of assaults are that

“an offence committed against someone working in the public sector or providing a service to the public”

is “an aggravated factor”, but there is no clarity about what is contained within that. If someone is abusive that factor should be taken into account—perhaps for a community sentence, which might be the most appropriate route. I want the shop worker at the front of the Co-op on their own to be able at least to say to someone, “Look, there is a sign there. If you continue this poor behaviour you are liable for an aggravated offence. Please stop.” It is a protection, if not a final conviction.

Mark Tami: It is not just in the shop that people can be targeted. They can be targeted on their way home, particularly if some of the offenders live in the locality. They can be subject to that sort of attack all the time.

David Hanson: Indeed. Again, shop staff are part of the community. The town I live in is 12,000-strong. The people who work in small shops there live in the town. They put a uniform on for 20 hours a week in some cases. In some cases, low-paid staff are putting a uniform on and enforcing the law of the land. We have to give them support. As well as the legislation, we also need to look at prosecution and the response from the police. That is important.

Following on from bringing together the numbers and examining legislation, the third of my six points is about engaging with police and crime commissioners to make shop crime a priority. The ACS has a pledge, which basically says that police and crime commissioners should pledge to be

“confronting reoffending, particularly prolific reoffenders with drug dependencies”

and

“working to standards on what a ‘good response’ to shop theft looks like”,

which is the very point that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton made. Another pledge is to be

“always responding promptly to shop theft where violence is involved or where a suspect is detained”.

Often it is a shop staff member detaining someone who is drunk or out of their head on drugs in the shop.

Fifteen of the 40 police and crime commissioners have signed up to that pledge, which means that 25 have not. It is important that the Home Office grabs hold of the issue, co-ordinates a response, gives a level of guidance and priority and indicates that this is an important issue. We can argue about police numbers—we have done and will continue to do so—but this is an important issue. This crime causes trauma and difficulties and the Government should examine it, so I urge them please to engage with police and crime commissioners.

The fourth of my six points is, going back to what I said earlier, about community-based penalties. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) has indicated one mechanism. Drug and alcohol orders are another. There may be other things that can be done, including with approaches to CCTV. There could be guidance on other issues where we can give support and help. A lot of employers, such as the Co-op, are investing a lot of money in headsets, CCTV and a whole range of wireless operation things, but not every store can do that, particularly individual stores, where it is an extra burden of cost. Support for some of the community penalties will take pressure off them.

My fifth and almost final ask is for the Government, five years on, to review the £200 limit to see whether it is working, whether it has made a difference and where we are with that.

My sixth ask for the Minister is simply this: the Home Office, with the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Government, could explore the whole range of good practice that can be undertaken and push it out. I welcome the ongoing discussions with the organisations, but that can be done on a regular basis. I know there is a business group. What have the outcomes of it been in the nine years it has been established? What positive outcomes from it have moved things on?

Going back to my time in the Home Office, we had funds available that key organisations could bid for to help reduce crime. CCTV camera schemes could be discussed and improved. There might be all sorts of radio wireless schemes. There might be a whole range of things that the Home Office could do. It could have a fund for organisations to bid against for support to ensure we make a difference.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): On the particular issue of CCTV, the right hon. Gentleman is correct to raise the prospect of the Home Office considering whether CCTV infrastructure across the UK can be improved, particularly in our towns and cities. Not only would that help the detection and prosecution of certain instances of retail shop crime, but it would act as a deterrent. I am glad to say that in my part of Wales, Dyfed-Powys police and the commissioner, Dafydd Llywelyn, have recently reinvested a lot in CCTV infrastructure. Shopkeepers in Aberystwyth and Cardigan are keen to see that return.

David Hanson: There is a pile of good practice, and the key thing is that the Home Office is in a great position, with the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Government, to pull these things together and potentially provide seedcorn funding for innovative schemes that could develop into ways of reducing crime and shop theft in particular.

The “Crime Report 2019” from the Association of Convenience Stores gives a whole range of advice and guidance as a sector on reducing crime, involving CCTV; acid and knives; how to deal with ATM thefts; antisocial behaviour, which is key; behaviour outside stores, which often attracts people whose behaviour is antisocial; how to deal with cyber-crime or internal staff theft, which happens occasionally; what to do with age-restricted sales; and how to design a store, looking to design out crime. The Home Office can get a grip, and give advice and support, on such things.

Those six asks can be developed as part of the consultation. My hon. Friends may think of and develop more, but those six can move the situation on. As I said, and we must remember it, this is not a victimless crime: this crime will impact on the store owner, the financial viability of the business, and the health, wealth and wellbeing of the members of staff. It drives up the cost of food and produce that we buy, and it causes tremendous upset and a great deal of antisocial behaviour. It does not happen just in London, other major cities or in banks; it happens on every street on every day of the week.

As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to shine a light on the issue, to offer solutions and to support the Minister in the solutions that she has graciously brought to the table but, in doing so, to keep her feet to the fire to ensure that she delivers on the consultation. We do not want just to talk about such things, and for my words to float to the ceiling of the Chamber; we want them to result in change for the better. The Minister has a chance to grapple with this and to make a success of that. She will have my full support if she does so. If she cannot grapple with it, we will have further debates and discussions until the Government do.

2.2 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) for securing the debate and for his excellent speech.

For nearly 20 years I worked for USDAW, the shop workers’ union. I spoke day in, day out with shop workers affected by abuse, threats and violence. When I started out, I heard abuse mentioned as part of the banter in the coffee room, or members would speak at conferences about the abuse that they had received, trying to support each other and laughing at customers who abused them. They were trying to see the funny side, as so many working people do to get through. I soon realised that such offences were not laughable and not just the odd occurrences; this happened day after day, week after week, sapping away at people’s energy, self-confidence and self-esteem, and their ability to do their job.

I therefore worked with USDAW to set up the Freedom From Fear Campaign, with workers from across that great union, from shops and companies, and from all across the country. I am pleased to say that we had an

enormous amount of engagement from shop workers, who welcomed the fact that at least they had a voice to speak about what was happening to them in the workplace. Also, professional support could be put together through companies, the trade union and professional organisations to ensure that incidents got reported as far as possible, and that employers did as much as they could to support their staff, putting investment into CCTV, reporting systems or counselling for people who were traumatised.

Shop workers have to put up with far too much abuse, threats and violence each and every day. On the basis of our surveys, we worked out that every minute of every working day another shop workers suffers abuse. Each day, more than 1,000 threats of violence are reported. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) commented, those threats do not just affect people in the workplace; threats are made by people who live in the same towns and communities as shop workers, so not just those workers but their children and families are affected.

Each day, 737 assaults are reported, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. Far too many threats, assaults and instances of abuse are not reported either to an employer or to the police. As a union, USDAW has worked very hard to try to change that culture—to try to get the reports in place and to get employers and police to act on them. But too often, the impact on shop workers is not taken into account. We have fewer police on our streets and fewer police cells and custody suites; my local one in Buxton is due to close in a couple of months. That will impact on the number of arrests that can be made and the number of offenders who can be dealt with. Courts are closing down. We are seeing a reduction in arrests and prosecutions and, at the same time, a lack of the support services that my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said exist in Manchester. I wish that such services were available in my rural area to refer prolific offenders to; too often, they are not.

Victims of crime over the years have told me how they have struggled to get back to work after being threatened or assaulted. They can have flashbacks; they suffer post-traumatic stress disorder, for which there are very few treatment services. That affects them in the workplace as they try to return to work. They might find that impossible, so they lose their job and livelihood as well as their confidence, self-esteem and courage to go out into the community.

The impact that I have described simply is not taken into account. With the reduction in the number of staff in retail, employers also have to play their part. There should not be lone working, particularly in areas that have seen assaults and antisocial behaviour in stores, but we see this far too often—staff, often women, left to cope alone at night with gangs of teenagers or with possible offenders. Employers have a duty of care to staff, and I am pleased that many employers, such as the Co-op, have put a lot of investment into supporting their staff, but others do not and we need to send out a message from this place that that is not acceptable and that employers have a duty of care that includes protection against known threats of violence.

If police get involved with employers, working with CCTV and the evidence that employers gather as part of their work, they will find that they can work with both employers and shop workers. In an era when we

[Ruth George]

are seeing a massive reduction in community policing, the police need to do that; they need to reach out to shop workers and to cafés and so on. If people want to know what is going on in a community, a sure way to find out is to ask the local shop workers; they will know. The police and the justice system need to give those workers the respect that they deserve. They need to take into account the impact of crime on those workers and their families and the impact on stores and on our high streets, which are too often suffering a decline. If they can work with them to tackle persistent offenders and get evidence on the drug dealers who are too often pushing drugs to victims who then go out and commit shop crime, they will find that they can improve the policing in their area and improve their links with the community.

For many years, I have worked with USDAW to argue for a separate offence of assaulting a worker. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn set this out. Shop workers do not feel that assaults and threats against them are taken seriously enough. The sentencing guidelines are extremely complicated. I worked with previous Governments on them, and there are so many factors to be taken into account that it is almost impossible for a victim of crime to see how the impact on them has had any impact on a sentence, even when an offender is actually brought to justice. A separate offence would simplify sentencing. It would encourage prosecutions, because it is simpler to get a prosecution in place through one branch of the law and through an Act. It would have a deterrent effect as well and shop workers would feel that the law is on their side. It sends the message that assaulting a shop worker is not preferable to being caught shoplifting. We in this House must send out that message to all shop workers, bar workers and café staff. They need to know that we, the police and the criminal justice system are on their side, because they are always on our side.

2.10 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing this debate and on his thoughtful and comprehensive opening speech. Not surprisingly, much of what I say will echo comments that have already been made. I thank members of the all-party group on retail crime and its former chair, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), who have done so much to raise awareness of the issue both in Parliament and elsewhere.

In my constituency of Selly Oak, shops lost more than £214,000 last year because of shoplifting and other criminal acts. As we have heard, the knock-on effect is equivalent to a tax of about 7% on every consumer transaction. Much harder to calculate, as my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) indicated, is the impact on owners, family members and staff who are threatened, intimidated and subjected to frequent violent assaults, including murder. Tragically, we recently had the murder of Ravi Katharkamar in Pinner, north-west London—a hard-working family man trying to go about his business.

We know that there were at least 10,000 attacks on shop workers. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn cited a higher figure from the British retail crime survey, which suggested that one of the issues is how the crime is identified and recorded. As with a number of offences, there is always some dispute about how a crime is recorded and therefore how much certainty we can have about the volume of particular crimes. As has been said, many of the perpetrators are repeat offenders, and perhaps in some cases regular offenders. They tend to target high-value items or items that are easily disposed of. It is a growing problem. The Home Office's commercial victimisation survey reported that such crimes in the retail and wholesale sector had doubled between 2016 and 2017, and the same study also revealed at least half a million assaults and threats against retail staff—about 250 a day.

Part of the problem, as we have heard, is overstretched police services, which have substantially fewer resources. In the west midlands alone, we have seen the loss of 2,000 officers since 2010 and cuts to the budget of about £175 million. Our own chief constable has publicly admitted that his force can no longer cope with the range of demands made on it. Against such a background, we need a new approach to the issue of retail crime.

I certainly agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn that, first, we have to recognise the scale of the problem, its financial impact on consumers and businesses, and its effect on ordinary people just trying to go about their business, earn a living and provide a service. There are about 46,000 convenience stores in the UK, of which 72% are operated by independent retailers or as part of a symbol group such as Spar, Nisa or Costcutter. They provide flexible employment for more than 365,000 people and 24% of shop owners work more than 70 hours per week. It is not easy, and they deserve a better deal.

On recognition, we need an agreed definition of business crime, so that all police forces record such crime to the same agreed standard. My right hon. Friend referred to the retail crime survey, which reported something like 3.5 million incidents of retail crime in 2017. At the same time, official statistics recorded only 382,000 incidents of shoplifting, which implies that there is massive under-reporting of the crime or that there is a recording issue.

Interestingly, if we add the definition of robbery, we get nearly 12,500 further incidents per year, and if we add the definition of burglary, we come up with another 7,000. There is an argument for agreeing a common definition that would allow us to get a better grip on what is happening. That would go a long way to identifying the real scale of the problem and might end the false debate about whether there are significant regional variations, which is not entirely convincing—it may be more of a recording issue.

The fact that the police will not investigate shop thefts with a value of less than £200 is virtually an incentive to offend. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn said, because of stretched police resources and different ways of dealing with things, I understand how we have ended up in the situation where those who are caught with stolen goods worth less than £200 are fined and allowed to pay by post, but frankly that reduces it to the status of a parking offence. Psychologically,

it decriminalises the activity, which is why people think it is not as serious as it genuinely is. His call for a review is essential in the face of the growing crime levels.

For years, before I came to this place, I worked with young offenders, and I spent a lot of my life arguing for out-of-court disposals and community disposals, but the problem with out-of-court disposals in this area is that offenders are repeatedly issued with cautions, conditional discharges and small fines for committing almost identical crimes, so it has no impact. We should at least introduce proper banning orders, so that people who commit repeat offences in that way are banned from specific shops or retail areas. We have to find a way to curb the repetition of the activity.

Where those who are engaged in these offences have obvious addiction problems, we have to place more emphasis on that and make more effort to deal with the addiction issue. My right hon. Friend referred to the reduction in the numbers from the last year of the Labour Government to last year. There must be pressure on the courts to recognise that that is a problem and to ensure that the sentence sets out to tackle the addiction issue. A disposal that pushes that to one side is of little value and, again, is an incentive to repeat that behaviour.

Those who threaten, intimidate and commit violent attacks on shop workers should be charged with an aggravated offence. There should be an additional penalty and it should be made abundantly clear that they are not able to get away with that. My right hon. Friend mentioned the request by the Association of Convenience Stores for a pledge from police and crime commissioners. Next year, we have an election for the police and crime commissioner in the west midlands—in fact, I think that there are elections in other parts of the country as well. I will certainly demand such a pledge from all candidates in the west midlands election, and will encourage all shop owners in my constituency to do the same. We want a clear and unequivocal commitment to prioritising the tackling of retail crime and violence against shop workers.

I have a pretty good relationship with the current police and crime commissioner, David Jamieson, who is doing a good job. I looked at the police and crime plan for 2016 to 2020 while I was thinking about this debate. It is quite an impressive document of 40 pages, which deals with all sorts of important issues—road traffic injuries, mental health, young people and animal cruelty—but I could not find a single reference to retail crime, shoplifting or violence against shop workers. To be fair, page 6 refers to

“working with companies and other partners to reduce overall business crime”,

and on page 27 there is a section on supporting economic development, which also refers to working with companies.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn said that 25 of the commissioners have not signed up to the pledge. The same ACS survey shows that only nine of 40 police and crime plans explicitly refer to retail or business crime. That is simply not good enough. We want a pledge from all candidates at the next election that if they win, the plan will contain a section about tackling retail crime and shop worker violence. It should detail what they will do to address the issue.

I, like my right hon. Friend, acknowledge that the Minister has indicated her interest in this subject and her determination to improve the situation, for which I

thank her. Ideally, we would see the production of a new retail crime prevention strategy, drawn up in conjunction with the sector. We need a strategy that expands on who has responsibility and what items are required to crack down on crime. We have heard about some of the good initiatives, such as that in Manchester and those of USDAW, ACS and the Central England Co-operative, which I understand is seeking a meeting with the Mayor of the West Midlands combined authority, Andy Street. If he is listening, he has an opportunity to get in on the act and help out.

We need a strategy that expands on who has responsibility for what and itemises the steps that are required to crack down on crime. I would like to see a process in which MPs get a monthly or bi-monthly constituency-level report that shows the hotspots and trends, so that there is a constant focus on taking action and utilising the measures that prove successful.

As we have heard, we must do more to help both smaller and independent stores, and encourage the Government to look at additional ways of helping to fund new and better security equipment for smaller retailers. There is a tendency to view the proceeds of crime funds as the answer to everything these days, but that money is derived from the actions of criminals, so maybe that is an area from which we could draw a little additional funding to support smaller retailers. I understand that they already spend something like £5 million of their own money on such measures. That is quite a lot for the owners of small shops, many of whom barely scrape a living—they are not rich people in any sense. We need these businesses; they provide crucial services. These people work very long hours and deserve our support.

2.25 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on bringing the issue to this Chamber for consideration. I said to him yesterday in a conversation that there are very few debates that he brings to Westminster Hall that I do not have an interest in, wish to participate in or support him on. It is pleasing to see the Minister in her place. She is not afraid of hard issues, and always responds positively and helpfully—we look forward to her response. She is amenable and approachable, and is prepared to give the answers to the hard questions that we ask.

As the Minister will know, policing is devolved in Northern Ireland. None the less, the issues that other Members have referred to and will refer to after my speech, are replicated across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the chance to participate in this debate.

I am pleased to represent Strangford in this Chamber; it is a name that I use in every speech I make. I am also pleased that the main town in my constituency, Newtownards, has bucked the trend: we have a thriving high street. We have boutique shops, specialist shops, branded shops and coffee shops—if you need it, we've got it. If hon. Members have not visited Newtownards—I know the right hon. Gentleman has—I encourage them to do so.

I am not as proud to say that we have had robberies and threatening behaviour, although it is extremely limited. However, any act of violence or theft is one

[Jim Shannon]

too many. I have three sons, two of whom have worked in shops and are now managers. During the time that they have worked in shops, they have experienced the violence that takes place. The right hon. Gentleman referred to people with drug and alcohol addictions, who sometimes try to steal from shops. In the violence that takes place, shop staff feel threatened. From my sons, I know that there have been occasions when staff have been taken off work. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) mentioned that sometimes staff are traumatised and are on sick leave for a long time. Those things happen, but it is not what someone expects when they sign up for a nine-to-five job or whatever shift they are on. The repercussions are great.

They have introduced CCTV in most of the shops in Newtownards. People who have carried out robberies, caused damage and acted violently or threateningly in shops have been made accountable for their actions. One thing that we should perhaps look at—the Minister might say this in her response—is encouraging shopkeepers to install CCTV in their properties. It seems to be a norm now, and it helps when thefts take place.

I was so disheartened to learn of the behaviour that some shopkeepers and workers have to put up with. The report provided by USDAW during Respect for Shopworkers Week gives shocking statistics. There have been instances of violence and threats, and it was made abundantly clear that abuse against shop workers remains a major problem on the frontline of retail. Other hon. Members have referred to it, and I could relate similar stories from my constituency.

Six out of 10 shop workers have experienced verbal abuse. Some 37% have been threatened by a customer, and 230 are assaulted every day. The number of incidents is in line with last year, but remains higher than two years ago. Two thirds of UK retail workers have been exposed to violence or aggression in the workplace. Earlier in the year, the British Retail Consortium reported a doubling of violence against retail staff in its annual retail crime survey. That is why this debate is so important, and why we are indebted to the right hon. Gentleman for bringing it forward.

I am in complete agreement with the general secretary of USDAW, who said:

“While there are many factors behind retail crime...severe cuts in police funding and the loss of over 20,000 police officers”

do not help. I am beyond alarmed to learn that some chief constables have said their officers can no longer attend incidents of thefts from shops, and that they are asking shop workers to detain shoplifters. We see stories on TV in which shop workers take it upon themselves to detain a person who is trying to rob a shop—I watched such a story on TV the other night. The level of courage of shopkeepers is to be commended, but that is not what they should be doing, so we have to look at that.

In my constituency, I met the local chief superintendent to discuss the fact that the Police Service of Northern Ireland would no longer investigate drive-offs at petrol stations. I am not sure how good other Members' knowledge of such incidents is, but unfortunately in Northern Ireland and in my constituency, statistics out this week show a 2% rise in drive-offs.

The meeting that we had with the Chief Constable, I think last October, involved both garage owners and the retail association. We feel that it is not the responsibility of the garage owner to take action to retrieve money from drive-offs. That is a straight theft issue and should be the responsibility of the police, or the PSNI as it is in Northern Ireland. It is not the responsibility of garage owners to source the person's address through the Driver and Vehicle Agency, and approach them and ask them to pay; yet only when they refuse to pay does it become the job of the PSNI to investigate. Such a process is hardly logical.

If someone walks out of Tesco, which featured on TV the other night, and drive away, having forgotten to pay for their week's shopping, it is considered a theft right away. However, if someone drives away from a petrol station, it is presumed to be forgetfulness. We are now asking garage owners to become detectives and track down people who have driven away with perhaps £60-worth of petrol or diesel. Clearly, the support is not there. To be fair to the police, I do not believe that it is because they are too lazy; it is because they are stretched thin. The police are so drastically underfunded and understaffed that they must prioritise every crime. Unfortunately, that leaves victims of crime having to go beyond what should be expected of them.

The right hon. Member for Delyn referred to ATMs. In Northern Ireland, we have had some of the most incredible thefts of ATMs. I am not sure whether it has been at the same level on the mainland. To give an example, one such theft happened just last weekend before I came over here. Thieves in these cases seem to pick ATMs where there is a JCB or digger not too far away building houses—that is what happened at the weekend. The thieves stole a big digger from the local building site and ripped the ATM out of the wall, which took them four minutes and 10 seconds. They had a car sitting ready. This is the story, and it was all caught on CCTV, so it is factually correct. They grabbed the ATM with the digger. The roof of the car was removed, and the ATM was placed in the back seat. Absurdly, this small car with no roof had a big ATM sitting in it, and was driven down the road. It took four minutes and 10 seconds.

Such crimes are hard for the police to respond to, given the timescale. However, there are other ways of doing so. May I make a suggestion to the Minister, as we were talking the other day about how to address such issues? All ATMs across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland should have a movement device inside them. As soon as it moves, the police will know where the ATM is going and can track it.

I understand that the tracking is done by helicopters. However, I also understand that we have two helicopters in Northern Ireland that the police can access. I suggest that the police in Northern Ireland do that, and we should do the same here on the mainland. I watch “Police Interceptors” on the TV—that may show how sad I am, but I always find it quite interesting. The police helicopters are able to source and follow the person who is getting away. For me, that is a better way of doing things. There are other ways to address the theft of ATMs, the threat to staff and so on, and we should explore them.

We simply need more help on the ground from the police. People are less likely to smash and grab if they think that there may be police on the beat, as opposed to being certain that they can run and not be caught. It is my belief that action is needed to help to protect staff. That must come in the form of legislation that provides for harsher penalties. Others have referred to the fact that penalties must deter. At the moment, with cautions and let-offs, the system seems not to work in the way that it should.

For those caught stealing or being abusive, and for those who assault workers, the message must be clear: such behaviour cannot and will not be tolerated. Instead of saying to people, "You can thump me once or twice before it actually matters," it should matter the first time that someone is verbally abusive. Assault is verbal abuse, not just physical abuse.

These people are going about their daily business, and that is why we are here, on behalf of the shop workers and staff who do not deserve to be intimidated in any way. Everyone, no matter what their job or how much they get paid, deserves to be respected and to go to their place of work, leave when their paid hours are done and not be subjected to abuse in between.

We can be sure that if I were verbally abusive to my staff—I certainly am not, for the record—it would be reported to the police and in the newspapers the next week. My staff would not let me off with that anyway, because they are capable of looking after themselves; I get told off many times by them. Why is it less important for employees of the local Russell's essentials shop to be assured of support and freedom from abuse? It is not.

I am conscious that other hon. Members want to speak, so in conclusion, we have not sent the right message thus far. We need to change the narrative and be clear that people have the right to work free from abuse, and we will support them in that right. That is what the right hon. Member for Delyn said, what I am saying, what other hon. Members have said and will say, and what the shadow Minister and the Minister will say as well. People have the right to support from the PSNI or the police on the UK mainland when someone commits a crime, and we will ensure that people's right of access to the police is protected. No one should ever dread going to work because of abuse while we, by omission, are saying that it is acceptable. It is not and never will be, and that must be made clear today.

2.36 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I pay great tribute to my near neighbour and right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) for his thorough introduction to the debate and his extensive campaigning on the issue. I also thank all other hon. Members who have contributed.

I represent the most beautiful and nicest constituency in Parliament; there is nowhere that quite compares with it. It is 240 square miles and contains many vibrant communities. There is also a strong sense of community. Almost any shop worker who lives in my constituency will speak about that strong sense of community; how much they enjoy their job, in many cases; and how important their shop is in the community. That is all true, but unfortunately, it is not true all the time.

One deeply concerning UK-wide statistic, which came from the excellent USDAW, is that more than 280 retail staff are violently attacked every day across the country. That should cause us to be very concerned. Those shop workers go to do their jobs in the same way that others go to do their jobs, and that level of attack is concerning.

In my constituency, we have a good mix of small and medium-sized stores, and a few supermarkets, and the bulk of them take the issue very seriously. I put on the record my particular thanks to the Co-op Group, however, not simply because I am a regular shopper at the Rhosllanerchrugog and Johnstown stores, but because it has sent briefings on individual constituencies and has had the honesty to say some of the bad things that have happened in its stores.

I do not like reading things word for word, but the Co-op gave three examples of things that happened in its stores in my constituency. The first example is:

"A drunk man came into the store and started abusing one of our colleagues. This colleague asked him to calm down and stop swearing. The bloke carried on shopping and on his way out carried on the abuse so he was escorted out of the shop. When outside, he started swinging his shopping bag and throwing punches. He ripped the colleague's glasses off his face and threw them into the car park. He then ran off."

This is the second one:

"Two hooded men came into the store with a large knife. One of them grabbed a colleague and put a knife to her neck, and the other one went behind the till and grabbed another colleague. They emptied the safe and the tills and ran into a waiting car."

This is the third account:

"Four blokes came into the store, they threatened colleagues with a knife and nicked all the cigarettes that had just arrived from the delivery."

The people affected by that are ordinary working people in our communities. In that case, it was in Clwyd South, but there are examples from across the country.

I welcome what the Co-op Group has done with its community fund. In addition to security measures and the like, it supports projects that tackle crime and crime prevention measures. Its corporate social responsibility in that regard is very much to be welcomed. Of course, we need to tackle the root causes as well as the problem itself.

Reflecting what everyone else has said, I want to say this to the Minister: whatever is happening at the moment—my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn spoke about that in great detail—it is clear that we have to do more. I echo the calls to make attacks on shop workers and other retail workers aggravated offences. When the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 was going through Parliament, and in the campaign that preceded it, we heard many reasons why it was not possible. The campaign continued, and I am pleased to say that the Government supported it. That was very important. Many of us were co-sponsors of the Bill, and we worked on a cross-party basis. I am pleased that it got Government support.

As my right hon. Friend said, it is important that we look at creating an aggravated offence for attacks on shop workers, because shop and retail workers are a bit different from other workers. The argument will always be made that we cannot have aggravated offences against everyone. Clearly not, but the difference is that people know that shop workers have ready access to cash and have to handle it all the time.

David Hanson: Is not the key point the issue of age-related sales? Shop workers are upholding the law on behalf of the Government.

Susan Elan Jones: Absolutely so. I agree wholeheartedly. Those are the everyday dangers that shop workers have to face, and they should not have to do so. They have to deal with people who are being obstructive outside their store. I have heard examples of shop workers who have had to deal with people who did not want to pay 5p for a carrier bag. I urge the Government to commit to doing something more on this issue. Let us work together, because it is not right that people in those shops, whether in the beautiful constituency of Clwyd South or anywhere else around the country, are affected in that way.

2.43 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I cannot say that my constituency is as large as that of the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), but it is small and perfectly formed, and very beautiful too. I am delighted to speak in this important debate. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) for securing it.

There are a great many shops in my constituency of Glasgow Central. It has the city centre, the major shopping streets and many large retailers of different kinds. We also have malls such as the Buchanan Galleries, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary, the St Enoch Centre, Princes Square and the Argyll Arcade. They can all be subject to retail crime in different ways. The Argyll Arcade had an armed robbery in 2014 because it contains many jewellers, and high-value goods are sold there.

Large retailers can put in place different things to cope with that. They can have CCTV and perhaps absorb some of the cost, but, as hon. Members have said, their shop workers put themselves at risk every day when they go in, because they do not know what kinds of things might happen in the store. In small businesses there is particular vulnerability, with people engaged in lone working. There are many small businesses across my constituency—retail shops that often have only one member of staff there all the time. There needs to be greater protection for them, because some of those shops cannot afford CCTV or anything like that. If things are stolen from them they have to absorb the cost. A few stolen items could be a whole day's takings. It is quite worrying for small businesses to face that kind of thing. They are particularly vulnerable.

I have a wee bit of experience in retail. I worked for Next for five years in the Buchanan Galleries and in Aberdeen and Hamilton. During that time we employees were always told not to put ourselves at risk. If someone came in to steal something we should let them go. The shop and the police would deal with it: "Don't put yourself at risk." However, it is difficult, seeing something like that happening, not to try to stop someone or intervene. The thieves we saw coming into the shop could be quite gallus. In the Buchanan Galleries at the start of a shift the managers were meeting, discussing what was happening in the store, and when they turned around someone had walked in, and walked off with a whole rail of expensive dresses. It was around Christmas, so Members will understand the type of expensive

dresses the shop would be trying to sell. Someone had come in and taken them, right next to a bunch of managers standing having a meeting, and walked off into the shopping centre and out into the street. There is nothing that people determined to do such acts will hold back from. They are absolutely gallus and brazen, and will do that time and again.

People would often steal from shops such as Next to try to return the things later and get the money back. They would be stolen not just for people to use or sell on; people would perpetrate a fraud against the store by trying to take the items back and get cash for them. Members of staff behind the till had to be aware of that, when someone was trying to return something, and challenge them. Refusing to take a return is another occasion when shop owners can be at risk; customers can kick off when there is a challenge.

The right hon. Member for Delyn mentioned drugs and alcohol as drivers for some of the type of crime in question. In Aberdeen someone would come in, on occasion, clearly under the influence of something, and try to steal children's clothes by shoving them into their pockets and down their trousers. Staff would then put themselves at risk if they tried to intervene in some way and get that person, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, out of the store—so that is another risk.

The figures from Police Scotland seem to show that shoplifting has increased. They are up 10% from April 2017 to March 2018. That is more than 2,700 more incidents. Police Scotland find that poverty is definitely something of a driver. The increase was not in thefts of dresses or watches or things of that kind; it is people stealing food, to get by, because they cannot cope. Items such as infant formula can now be out of many families' reach, because they are so expensive, and people resort to desperate measures as a result of austerity and poverty. The Government should bear that in mind when they look to tackle retail crime. Some of those crimes are very much crimes of desperation.

I want to touch on the evidence of the impact on workers. The survey on under-age sales conducted in 2016-17 found that there is a disproportionate effect on some workers: 56% of Asian or Asian British workers in the UK have reported abuse at least once a month, compared with 31% of white workers; 30% of Asian or British Asian workers in the UK reported being subject to racial abuse; and 10% reported being physically attacked at least once a month, as a result of challenging customers for ID. I agree with hon. Members who have said that challenging people for ID is a driver in many instances. That needs to be taken into account. I support all moves to improve the charges and convictions for that, because there needs to be a deterrent.

Workers who are not confident in challenging people for ID can end up in trouble themselves, because if they sell to under-age people they can be disciplined or face criminal charges. Workers are personally liable if they sell to a young person, facing a fine of up to £5,000 and/or imprisonment for up to three months. If workers are not confident in challenging for ID, there is a further impact on them as well. It may be that workers choose to leave the retail sector altogether if they regularly come under such pressure.

Lastly, an emerging issue is automation. We have all seen the new automated tills in many supermarkets. They are coming up everywhere, which is a risk to

workers' jobs; there may be fewer workers in stores if there are more automated tills. Research shows that people who would not normally steal from shops are much more tempted to do so if they use a self-service checkout. People have been seen passing off more expensive things as carrots or onions to cheat the device—something is being weighed, although it is clearly not the item being sold—and figures showed that more carrots had been sold than had ever been stocked because of people doing that.

Again, that is putting temptation in the hands of people who may be quite desperate and who may want to cheat the system because they cannot afford things. If that temptation is not checked on, people can be away and out the store before anybody realises that something has happened. There needs to be more examination of how automated tills drive retail crime and the results of that.

I will finish on the point that others finished on. Shop workers need to feel safe, as though they are not under pressure and that they are looked after. That goes from workers in the very largest supermarkets to sole workers. All of them deserve protection and our thanks for their work. We need to do a lot more to make sure that they feel safe and looked after, and if the law needs to change to do so, I would fully support that.

2.52 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing this important debate.

Local shops are the lifeblood of our economy and communities. Many people rely on them, as they provide an important sense of belonging, community and identity to our local areas. However, retail crime can have a hugely damaging effect on local businesses and communities. In Bradford South, we have seen a rise in instances of burglary and antisocial behaviour near shops, as well as a rise in theft and shoplifting. I am a huge advocate of the economic contribution that small businesses make to our economy. However, small business owners have raised with me that repeated burglaries are making their insurance costs so expensive that they are being driven out of business. That is honestly not acceptable.

We all know that the police face unprecedented pressures in the context of an extremely difficult funding situation. Put bluntly, the Government are simply not giving our police forces the resources they need to do their job properly. I know that our hard-working police officers want to be out there catching those criminals who blight our communities through theft and antisocial behaviour, but they are forced to prioritise. That too often means that serious crimes such as shoplifting and abuse are not given the priority they deserve.

As my right hon. Friend pointed out, this is not a victimless crime. Local communities like mine deserve better. Our businesses, customers and shop workers rightly expect retail crime to be thoroughly investigated. The Government must stop passing the blame and start funding our police properly. As I have said many times in this place, our police should be fighting crime, not fighting for funding.

I will turn to some of the positive work being done in my constituency to prevent retail crime and to support shop owners. Traders in parts of my constituency have

signed up to a pilot Shopwatch scheme designed to tackle crime. After a spike in retail crime, I called together police, councillors, council officers and traders to find ways to improve the situation. With local councillors taking the lead, I am pleased to say that the police, the council and businesses now work even closer together, sharing information through the Shopwatch scheme about those persistently offending in the area. That is done by WhatsApp and face-to-face meetings, and it is modelled on the established Pubwatch scheme. Early signs from the pilot are positive, and I look forward to seeing the full review of how the scheme can be rolled out across my constituency.

Figures recently published by USDAW, the ACS, the Co-operative Group and the BRC all show that violence and threats against and abuse of retail workers are on the increase. In 2018, nearly two thirds of shop workers experienced verbal abuse, while an average of 280 shop workers were assaulted each and every day. That is unacceptable. No one deserves to be attacked or abused simply for doing their job.

USDAW rightly points out that as well as being a threat to shop workers' physical safety, attacks and abuse can cause anxiety and considerable worry to those subjected to them and to their loved ones. Those workers deserve dignity at work and should not be seen as easy targets for violence and abuse. I therefore fully support USDAW's Freedom from Fear campaign, which is for tougher penalties for those who assault shop workers. That is especially important in the context of the greater obligations that we place on retail staff, such as to prevent under-age people from buying knives or acid. There is evidence that those age-related checks are a particular trigger for abusive behaviour.

I again pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn for attempting to amend the Offensive Weapons Bill to introduce age-related new offences in that area. I fully support him in that objective and indeed on each of his six asks in the debate. I hope that the Minister will set out in her closing remarks what more the Government plan to do to support retail workers to ensure that those who abuse or attack them are properly punished. I also hope that she will make it clear to the Home Secretary that the existing police funding settlement is simply not good enough.

2.57 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing this debate. He has worked on this area of public policy for many years. As a member of the USDAW group and of the Co-op party, and as a proud shopper at the Co-op, I too feel that I have several reasons to participate in this debate.

We have had quite a congenial debate so far, and I put my thanks to the Minister on the record as well. As with her work on modern slavery and gangs, this is an area of her brief that she takes seriously. Although few Conservatives are present today, the quality of the Minister will in some ways make up for that, for which we should be grateful.

My constituency, much like that of the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), is small but perfectly formed—[*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the

[Gareth Snell]

Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) says it is not, but it is—she is more than welcome to visit any time she likes between now and 2 May, and I will show her.

Like many urban-based constituencies, however, my constituency can be broken down into a series of small communities linked together over history. Whether people are in the middle of my constituency, tootling up towards the moorlands and passing through Baddeley Green or Milton, or going towards Newcastle through Penkhill, they will pass a Co-operative store—I will constrain my remarks to those stores but, to cover all bases, other convenience stores are available.

Many community convenience stores are open from very early in the morning until very late at night. Normally, the ones in my constituency are the only shops open in a community at 10 o'clock at night, the only store open on a whole high street—everywhere else closes at teatime—and the only convenience store in the village that can still sell a pint of milk at 20 to 10 in the evening. Often, they are the place where people gravitate, because the light is on. In the winter, they are the only place that may be warm and, after a couple of drinks in the local pub, people may call in for a snack on the way home. At those times, the shop workers are most vulnerable.

Those times are not peak hours, so the workforce are not numerous and lots of people are not milling around in the streets outside, giving a sense of solidarity and community—the shop workers are on their own. If they are on the periphery of the city of Stoke-on-Trent, they will be far away from anyone else at work or from any on-duty police officer who will automatically be concentrating on the more densely populated urban areas in the city centre. That does not mean that crimes perpetrated against them should have any less value than those perpetrated against someone in the city centre.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) said, we are asking for more and more of the laws that we pass in this place to be enforced by civilians, at the till and at the point of sale. We are asking them to check ID, whether for the purchase of cigarettes, alcohol, or a knife. I am glad that the Co-operative Group has said that it will stop selling knives in its stores to prevent them from being available and used for crime in communities. However, we are asking civilians—individuals who have gone into a relatively low-paid retail job—to enforce the laws that we create. At the same time, we are saying that if those civilians receive abuse or are the victim of aggressive behaviour as a result of enforcing those laws, they may not get the follow-through and the justice that they desire. That clearly needs to be rectified, which is why I was proud to support the amendments that my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn tabled to the Offensive Weapons Bill, and why I am glad that constructive conversations are continuing between him and the Government.

There is another aspect of this issue that I am concerned about. I have been sent stories similar to those sent to my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), and the individuals against whom those crimes are being perpetrated tend disproportionately to be women. They are disproportionately older women who

are working a low-paid job, and who disproportionately live in parts of the world where the sense of security has disappeared. I fear that there is a cultural issue in play as well: if people do not feel safe going to work in those shops, people will not feel safe shopping in them, and we cannot afford to lose those convenience stores from high streets. We cannot afford to lose those small shops from villages, because in most of those places they are the last shops standing, whether they are independent or part of a larger chain.

We need to start making examples of some of the perpetrators of these crimes, and demonstrate that their crimes will be taken seriously. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn said, there need to be little signs that we can point to and say, “If you carry on with this, you are undertaking an aggravated offence. You will be prosecuted, and there will be a punishment for your actions.” There are obviously penalties for aggravated robbery and other crimes, but I feel that the sense among some consumers that they are entitled to take out their anger, wrath or frustration on somebody who is at work, serving them and their community, is not taken as seriously as crimes such as robbery.

I also want to touch on a statistic that has already been mentioned: according to USDAW's research, 280 retail staff are violently assaulted every day. Given that these isolated small shops will usually open from 6 am until 10 pm, a little bit of jiggery-pokery with the maths suggests that in the three hours this debate could go on for, up to 50 people will have been violently assaulted while we sit here discussing this issue. I do not think we should tolerate any violence, let alone up to 50 assaults; I stress that point not because I want to belabour it, but because I think it is important. These are relatively low-paid women workers who are serving their community through their roles, and it is simply unacceptable for them to be left in a situation in which they potentially face violence on a daily basis.

Like all Labour Members, I particularly enjoy setting six tests when it comes to any aspect of public policy, and I endorse the six tests that my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn has laid out. I particularly want to talk about community penalties, because that is one area in which I have seen success in my own constituency and community. The perpetrators of aggressive behaviour in shops on little high streets are made to go back and tidy up those high streets; they are used as the labour to fix some of the problems that they have helped create. That restorative process demonstrates to the community that that sort of aggressive action is not tolerated. As has already been pointed out, most of the staff who work in those shops tend to live in those communities and know the people responsible, so community penalties restore a sense of faith that justice is being done.

[PHIL WILSON *in the Chair*]

Community penalties also allow networks to grow. I want to place on the record my thanks to the Stoke-on-Trent City Centre Partnership for the work it does through its Shopwatch scheme. It has successfully created a network of shops, mainly independent but also with the intu Potteries shopping centre, where anyone working alone in a shop knows that there is someone in a next-door shop who can come and help if there is a problem; they work through a network of radios and share intelligence about frequent perpetrators.

Intelligence networks are important not only for preventing crime, but so that people working alone in shop, perhaps around closing time, know that if there is a problem, there is somebody they can call—somebody who is looking out for them to whom they have recourse. That sort of community-based solution is important, but it should be done with Government, not in spite of Government. It should be the normal practice, not an ad hoc arrangement that arises from good practice in communities.

I want to leave as much time as possible for the Front Benchers, so I will end by asking the Minister to touch on or consider what role there might be for the future high streets fund and some of the town funds in funding some of these community-based improvements. We in Stoke-on-Trent do not want to see high fences or fortresses created around shopping areas, but a CCTV camera here and there can go a long way to making people feel safe, as can eliminating grotspots or dark spots where people can hide after committing a crime, and making sure there is help and support for individuals who may be going through tough times, leading them to commit these actions. I wonder whether treating retail crime not merely as a criminal justice issue but as a community and economic development issue could be a way to lever in money from other Government Departments. Small shops are valuable to our high streets. Although we should prosecute the perpetrators, we should also value these shops as integral elements of the communities we all serve.

3.6 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Wilson, and giving me the opportunity to repeat some of the statistics that may have already been mentioned.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) for securing this important debate. The 2019 crime report produced by the Association of Convenience Stores illustrates the scale of retail crime in the UK. The association estimates that in 2018 retail crime cost the convenience sector more than £245 million. Through no fault of their own, shops across the UK are being subjected to a retail crime tax. It is estimated that local shops in my constituency lost more than £170,000 to retail crime last year. The businesses on Coatbridge and Bellshill Main Street provide jobs for the local community and contribute to the local economy, and it is frustrating to think that they are penalised by retail crime. If the rising costs of retail crime are not tackled, our communities will ultimately pay the price, with the loss of local business and jobs impacting on the local economy.

We often hear the Government talk about the importance of our high streets, but with no support, their shops are closing down. If the Government are serious about supporting high streets across the country, it is time they acted to prevent retail crime. The National Audit Office highlighted an 18% reduction in the police workforce. As the workload and pressure put on the police continue to increase, their ability to respond to retail crime is affected. That is why I call on this Government and the Scottish Government to invest in community policing. Retailers estimate that 79% of thefts against their business are carried out by repeat offenders, and that 50% of repeat offenders are addicted to drugs or alcohol. Perhaps

it is time for the Ministry of Justice to review how repeat offenders are dealt with and to look for ways to tackle the root causes of reoffending, such as addiction.

Retailers have also expressed concern about the introduction of section 22A of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980. Unintended, that provision on low-value shoplifting—below the £200 threshold—may have helped to increase shoplifting, as it is no longer a police priority. I urge the Government to reflect on whether section 22A is helpful in the ongoing fight against retail crime.

When I was elected to the House, I said I would stand up and provide justice for workers, so I will talk about the impact of retail crime on shop workers. The ACS crime report estimated that there were almost 10,000 incidents of violence against shop workers last year; 41 of those incidents led to staff being injured. The Home Office commercial victimisation survey found that incidents of violence in the retail sector had more than doubled from 2016 to 2017. We know that shop theft is the No. 1 trigger of violence and abuse in the convenience sector. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his work to secure legal protections for shop workers who are responsible for enforcing age restrictions on products, and I am disappointed that the Government opposed those measures.

We await the outcome of the Government's call for evidence on violence and abuse directed at shop workers. I am disappointed by the no-show of any other Tory Members; they must have a safe working environment, unlike shopkeepers. Anyone who wants justice for workers, vote Labour.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Prime Minister is speaking in the House.

Hugh Gaffney: Sorry—does the Minister want to intervene?

Victoria Atkins *indicated dissent.*

Hugh Gaffney: I will continue my speech, then.

I pay tribute to USDAW, especially Jean Hession and her Scottish colleagues for their Freedom From Fear campaign, which seeks to ensure that shopworkers are not subjected to violence and abuse in their workplace. I commend USDAW for its Time for Better Pay campaign to achieve a living wage of £10 an hour for all workers regardless of age, and to end to zero-hours contracts and insecure work—all measures that could greatly benefit shop workers across the UK.

This Government have to do more to support businesses and communities who suffer the consequences of retail crime. It is time to introduce greater legal protections for shop workers, who should never have to face abuse and violence simply for doing their job.

3.12 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is, as always, a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. We also thank Mr Robertson, who chaired the first part of the debate.

As others have done, I start by thanking the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) for securing the debate and opening it with a powerful and passionate speech. I will come back to this, but I pay tribute to the work he did as a Home Office Minister.

[David Linden]

We have heard 15 Back-Bench contributions, which is particularly impressive on a Thursday afternoon. This debate is clearly not the highlight of business today and many of our colleagues are in the Chamber, so 15 Back-Bench speeches shows there is clearly an appetite for debate on the topic.

The right hon. Gentleman set the scene by reminding us of some of the stark data from the British Retail Consortium, and he had six asks for the Minister, which I have no difficulty endorsing. He was right to remind us that this is not a victimless crime; we should be reminded of that regularly.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) spoke about her 20 years' experience in USDAW. I pay tribute to her for that. She talked about the police situation in England, as did a number of other Members; as a Scottish MP, I will not wade into that. She was absolutely right to place on the record the point about people working alone. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) reminded us that the loss in his constituency was £214,000, equivalent to a 7% tax, which is passed on to consumers. We need to take note of that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the situation in Northern Ireland, particularly his home town, Newtownards, about which he always speaks passionately. The people of Strangford are very lucky to have such a diligent constituency MP speaking passionately about Northern Ireland. He was right to highlight a problem that seems to arise particularly in Northern Ireland of ATM thefts that cause great damage.

The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) was rather controversial. In a largely consensual debate, she divided the Chamber by talking about the beauty of her constituency. She was right to remind us that, even in a close-knit community, retail crime remains an issue. She read out some powerful testimonies, which I think Members were quite moved by.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) spoke passionately about shopping outlets in her constituency. She is of course my constituency neighbour, so I will have nothing said about shopping there. Go east! Shop in Glasgow East. But she is absolutely right to speak about small businesses and the impact of lone working. We also learnt of her experience as a retail worker in Next and about some of the issues she was exposed to there. The Chamber is richer for heeding the personal experience of Members.

The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) spoke about the underfunding of police forces in England. I was interested in what she said about the local Shopwatch scheme pilot. The Pubwatch scheme in my own constituency has been very successful, so I am interested in the Shopwatch pilot and whether we could adopt it.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) spoke about the dangers of working in the evening. He also reminded us of our responsibilities as consumers. Far too often in shopping environments on a Saturday afternoon, people have a bunch of kids with them and they get quite stressed out, but as consumers we have a responsibility to act and behave in a certain way, which some people perhaps forget. Although people have spoken about some of the figures, I was struck by what he said:

up to 50 people will have been assaulted by the time this debate concludes. It reminds us of the danger that many people face just by going to work, so he was right to put that on the record.

My other constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), made a typically thoughtful speech. He was right to talk about the retail tax as well. He spoke about the situation in Bellshill Main Street and some of the costs for his constituency.

In Scotland there were 31,300 recorded offences of shoplifting in 2017-18, which equates to 58 per 10,000 inhabitants. The Scottish Government are acutely aware of how serious shop theft and physical and verbal abuse are in the retail sector. We are working closely with the Scottish Grocers Federation, Police Scotland and the Scottish Business Resilience Centre, and my colleague, Ash Denham, the relevant Minister, is progressing that.

This debate gives us the opportunity to pay tribute to the many retail workers who serve us every single day. We know that their work can be dangerous and often includes antisocial hours. First and foremost, today is an opportunity for us to acknowledge their hard work and place on the record the debt of gratitude that we owe every retail worker.

In my own constituency of Glasgow East we have vibrant retail outlets, including the small shops on Tollcross Road, Baillieston Main Street and Shettleston Road, and the much larger shopping centres such as the Lochs in Easterhouse, Glasgow Fort and the iconic Forge to name but a few. Each of those shopping centres provides significant employment opportunities in my constituency. I pay tribute to all of the staff, particularly the security guards who work tirelessly to ensure that those centres are enjoyable places for us to eat, shop and meet friends.

However, crime is prevalent in retail environments and many shopping centres have to undertake work to prevent shoplifting, which accounts for some 6% of recorded crime in Scotland. In advance of today's debate, I was in contact with Paul Wishart of Parkhead Forge and Phil Goodman of Glasgow Fort. Both of them told me about the challenges that their centres face in guarding against theft, which can lead to increased overheads. In the case of Glasgow Fort, the year 2018 saw a total of 279 incidents involving retail theft, attempted theft or fraud. That accounts for around 40% of all the incidents that Glasgow Fort's security team had to deal with.

In preparing for today's debate I was surprised to learn that security accounts for 25% of the total operating costs at the Fort: a significant overhead that is then passed on to the various retailers that occupy it. Although I am totally supportive of the security industry, I would much prefer to see retailers passing on savings to their hard-working shop staff who are so often, as Members have already said, underpaid. We know that retail is not one of the more handsomely paid roles.

Broadly speaking, retailers in the East End are hugely complimentary towards the local police, but I know from speaking to staff at the Forge that response times to shoplifting can vary. That is significant when there is no longer a community officer based in the centre. Longer response times put additional pressure on both security staff and shop staff. That means that some

retailers will not press charges, because they simply cannot afford to have members of staff tied up dealing with incidents.

One other frustration relates to the wider issue of deterrence and punishment. Sadly, in the case of Parkhead Forge, there are a number of repeat offenders who know exactly what kind of punishment they can expect to receive if caught shoplifting. One of the reasonable suggestions that Paul at the Forge made to me was that offenders should be asked to do their community service in the shopping centre where the crime was committed. Perhaps, if they did so, they would realise the impact that their actions had on the shop and, above all, on the staff.

However, I do not want to end on a negative note in what has been an excellent debate. I want to round off where I started, by thanking our hard-working retail staff, who consistently go above and beyond and ensure that the Fort, the Forge, the Lochs and all the small businesses in my constituency are places where we are proud to spend our money and support local jobs.

3.21 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. First, I declare an interest as a very proud member of USDAW and the Co-op, both of which have featured quite heavily in the debate. I congratulate my very knowledgeable and right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on once again securing a really important debate. I will keep my remarks short to allow the Minister to answer the many varied and insightful questions that have been raised by all colleagues today.

For many years, I have been an ardent supporter of USDAW's Freedom From Fear campaign, and I am acutely aware of the prevalence of violence committed against shop workers who are simply doing their job. USDAW's 2018 survey showed that in the past year nearly two thirds of shop workers were verbally abused, just under half were threatened, and an average of 280 shop workers were assaulted every day. That abuse and violence stands at an unacceptably high level. It is essential that we take action to reduce instances of abuse.

Crime against retailers is detrimental to both the businesses and the workers. Theft places a financial burden on the shop, and there is a negative impact on employees who are forced to endure abuse. Retail crime costs the sector an estimated £246 million. In my Swansea constituency alone, a reported £190,000 was lost as a result of this type of crime.

There are numerous examples of police failing to prosecute cases of retail crime, not because they do not want to, but because their resources are so pared back.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Carolyn Harris: It will be a pleasure to give way to our newest Member and a fellow Welsh MP.

Ruth Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the current funding cuts that all police forces are facing. Does she agree that the £30 million that has been cut from the Gwent police budget has a direct impact on

the way the police in my area can carry out their role both reactively and, just as importantly, proactively, to prevent shop crime from happening in the first place?

Carolyn Harris: May I say that that point was very well made? The point that we are making is that the lack of action because of the lack of resources is causing a lack of reporting. USDAW says that 17% of those attacked do not report the crime.

I have always been clear, when I have spoken about the effects of antisocial behaviour and crime, whether it involves physical violence or verbal abuse, that those incidents cause emotional and psychological damage. We have to do more to demonstrate that we are protecting retailers and their staff, who are on the frontline. We need to send a clear message to those prepared to commit these crimes that they will not be tolerated, that they are not acceptable, and that those committing them will be punished. It is the responsibility of this Government to do more to ensure the safety of our citizens; they must listen to the very wise words of all the speakers here today. I shall end my remarks with that and just say to the Minister that I hope she has listened carefully to what all Members have had to say and will respond accordingly to as many points as possible.

3.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members for a really thoughtful and thought-provoking debate. I am particularly grateful to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for such a brief response, because that gives me plenty of time to answer the many important points that have been raised.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing this debate on a matter that I know is of huge importance to him and his constituents. It has been a genuine pleasure to work with him and members of the all-party parliamentary group on retail crime, chaired by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), particularly during the passage of the Offensive Weapons Bill, because we have made real progress. I hope we will make much more in future.

I will make a gentle point for *Hansard* regarding a comment that was made earlier. This debate is taking place alongside a very important statement by the Prime Minister in the main Chamber, about the European Council. I know that many hon. Members will have had real difficulty deciding which important debate they should take part in.

The importance of our local shops and convenience stores unites us all; every single constituency has such shops. I take this opportunity to thank the local shops in my wonderful Louth and Horncastle constituency. I may get into a battle with the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) about whose constituency is more beautiful, but I have the pleasure of having some special market towns in my very rural constituency, as well as many independent shops on our high streets that we are keen to preserve. I hope that all the shops in all our constituencies will have a busy and profitable Easter period in week or two ahead.

[Victoria Atkins]

Right hon. and hon. Members have very powerfully made the point that crimes against our local shops and businesses are not victimless—everyone who spoke made that point strongly. I think that we were all struck by the examples given by the hon. Member for Clwyd South and indeed by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who brought some of her own experiences to the Chamber. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) talked about the cultural impact of such crimes, not just on the immediate victims, but on the wider shop staff community and then on villages and small towns. I am grateful to him for making that important point.

Violence and abuse remain the biggest concern for retailers. That is the No. 1 priority for the National Retail Crime Steering Group, which I chair, and I am delighted to see members of the group in the Public Gallery. The group brings together retailers, trade bodies, police and others, to help to ensure that our response to tackling those crimes is as robust as it can be. Our last meeting, a month or so ago, was extraordinary and focused solely on the issue of violence. I am grateful to the members of the group for helping my officials to draft the call for evidence in such a way that we get the richest evidence we can from shop workers and others in the retail industry.

I am absolutely determined to tackle this problem. Every day, we ask shop workers to enforce the law, whether by refusing to sell age-restricted products to those whom they believe are below the legal age, or by confronting criminals who are trying to steal from their business. Shop workers, like all employees, have the right to feel safe at work, without fear of violence or intimidation. That is why, on 5 April, I launched a call for evidence to enable us to learn more about the scale and extent of the issue and inform our response.

We are seeking information in four key areas. First, information on prevalence and data will help to address gaps in our understanding and to build a more accurate picture of the nature of violence and abuse toward staff. Secondly, information on prevention and support will help us to gather evidence and information about what works in preventing such crimes, including how businesses can support their staff. Thirdly, information on enforcement and the criminal justice system will help to develop our understanding of the reporting of incidents, application of the current legislative framework, and the response by the police and wider criminal justice system. Fourthly, identifying further best practice will help to establish what works and to consider potential non-legislative solutions.

The call for evidence will run for 12 weeks, to ensure that those with an interest have sufficient time to respond. Obviously, we will consider the responses carefully and publish our response as swiftly as possible after the call for evidence closes.

David Hanson: The Minister has indicated that the closure for responses is June, but I would welcome some indication of when she expects to respond publicly. The Home Office has still not published a response to an outstanding consultation on air weapons, which closed in February 2018, so I would welcome some framework for her official response.

Victoria Atkins: My intention is to publish it in the autumn. I ask all right hon. and hon. Members to spread the word through their networks and encourage local shopkeepers to contribute to the consultation, because the richer the tapestry of evidence that we have, the better we will be able to respond.

The call for evidence is supported by a wider package of measures. The Home Office is providing £50,000 of funding for a targeted communication campaign, led by the Association of Convenience Stores, to raise awareness of the existing legislation to protect shop workers. We have published guidance on gov.uk about the use of impact statements for business, which provide victims with the opportunity to tell the courts about the impact a crime has had on their business. From my experience of working in the criminal courts, I know that those statements can make a huge difference and have a real impact on judges as they are considering how best to sentence offenders.

We have also worked with the police to develop guidance for staff and retailers to use when reporting emergency and violent incidents. As I say, I encourage everyone with an interest to respond to the call for evidence, including shop staff who have been directly affected by violence and abuse at work.

Interestingly, the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), who is sadly no longer in his place—he may be in the main Chamber—made a wider point about courtesy and the use of language. I am sure that we all consider that an important point that we will encourage people to remember as they visit our shops. Shop workers deserve politeness and courtesy, as does anyone else in this world. The example was given of an item of stock running low, which can be frustrating, but we should try to behave with courtesy.

I will quickly touch on the issue of police funding, which a couple of hon. Members raised. It has largely been a debate of great collaboration and agreement, but I must point out that police funding will increase by more than £1 billion in 2019-20, including, with the help of council tax, extra funding for pension costs and the serious violence fund. The Home Secretary has also stated that he will prioritise police funding at the next spending review.

Steve McCabe: Does the Minister accept that in the west midlands, the increase in the central grant for police funding will be entirely eaten up by dealing with the pension funds? That will mean that the same consumers who are paying the 7% tax on crime will also pay the council tax for any improvement in their policing position. In the west midlands, that is a standstill position.

Victoria Atkins: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have given specific money to deal with the increase in pensions. I think he would agree that it is important to make sure that our police officers have their pension rights adhered to and honoured.

Furthermore, in the west midlands, we recently had a meeting with the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable to talk about measures to tackle serious violence, which is a particular problem. I was therefore delighted when the Chancellor granted an extra £100 million to deal specifically with serious violence. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's area will benefit from some of that.

I am delighted that the new hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) joined us. I was most interested to hear her intervention. I hope she will urge her police and crime commissioner to spend some of his reserves, which stood at £56 million as of March last year, because that or just a bit of it could go some distance. I am sure she will do that as a good new Member of the House of Commons.

The national business crime centre is a significant step in tackling business crime more generally. We recognise the importance of ensuring a co-ordinated response to crimes against businesses. That is why we have supported the national business crime centre, which launched in October 2017 with the support of Home Office funding through the police transformation fund. The centre provides information for police forces and businesses, offers a targeted alert service to support businesses nationally and facilitates national consistency in the management of business crime. It has proved to be a valuable resource for all businesses, not just retailers, and continues to provide essential guidance and support nationally. The resources include advice, examples of things that retailers can do to prevent crimes and training for staff to defuse potentially violent situations to help protect businesses, staff and customers alike. I urge Members to see whether the centre can be of assistance to shops and businesses in their local areas. In addition, the Home Office runs its commercial victimisation survey, which is an important measure of business crime as well.

One of the six points that the right hon. Member for Delyn made was about gathering good practice. There is a great deal of good practice already in the system. For example, many business crime reduction partnerships operate across England and Wales and bring significant benefit to their members, the wider community and the police. We have heard about other schemes, such as Pubwatch and Shopwatch, which the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) mentioned. There is also BusinessWatch and Radio Link, which I saw for myself in the constituency of Erewash. I liken such schemes to a form of vaccination. If every shop in the local area participates, the whole community is strengthened and empowered through the scheme's operation, but if one or two businesses do not sign up, it weakens the overall strength of the community response to these crimes. We are keen to encourage such schemes. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak challenged police and crime commissioners to make retail crime a priority. I agree with him; the point of police and crime commissioners is to set local policing priorities. I encourage Members to raise the issue with their PCCs.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted the importance of the response of local businesses. Indeed, there is lots of good practice from individual businesses that shows a very positive impact, such as the use of CCTV, which he rightly mentioned. It is much cheaper than it used to be. One plea to everyone who uses CCTV is to maintain it and replace the tapes. I know that seems a small, practical point, but regrettably investigations sometimes show that the CCTV evidence is not there because the machines have not been kept up to date. As long as businesses are able to do that, it is of real benefit. Some stores have invested in body-worn cameras to help to reduce levels of violence and abuse towards staff.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central made a point about the future high streets fund, which is £675 million to support local areas in England to invest in town centre infrastructure and to support redevelopment. He made an interesting point about whether the fund could be used to help with security, and I am happy to look into that for him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) is sitting behind me. She takes a keen interest in these issues, but because of her commitments cannot contribute verbally to the debate. She has reminded me that we have business improvement districts, which are business-led partnerships created through a ballot process to deliver additional services to local business. Improvements may include extra safety and security. In Chichester, all retail and other businesses contribute a 1% levy, and some of that money is used to fund walkie-talkies to act as a security system for support for workers. There are many examples out there of interesting schemes. They may differ in their applicability to different areas, but there are schemes out there that may help, if Members are interested.

The right hon. Member for Delyn rightly raised the issue of drugs and alcohol, as did other Members. We know that drugs can devastate lives, ruin families and damage communities. Our approach to drugs remains clear: we must prevent drug misuse in our communities and support people through treatment and recovery. Although drug misuse is at similar levels to a decade ago, we are absolutely committed to reducing it and the harm it causes. We have done that through, for example, the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. Since it came into force, more than 300 retailers across the UK have either closed down or are no longer selling psychoactive substances. That has helped to remove the presence of such substances from our high streets. Of course, there is more to do. Our drugs strategy sets out our approach, bringing together the police, the health community and global partners to tackle the illicit drugs trade, protect the most vulnerable and help those with a drug dependency to recover and turn their lives around.

Alison Thewliss: I am glad the Minister has moved on to the impact of drugs. Many retailers in Glasgow tell me that they have people coming in to inject in their toilets or at the back of their shops, which puts retail staff at risk. People do that because they do not have anywhere else to go. Will the Minister look again at the proposals from Glasgow for a supervised drug consumption room, which would take away that risk for retail workers?

Victoria Atkins: A delegation from the Scottish Parliament—from Glasgow, specifically—came to see me about that and described the problems. It seems that there is more scope for precision policing in the local area. Policing in Scotland is now devolved, and where there are alleyways with drug paraphernalia, as the delegation described, I think there is a role for precision policing.

The hon. Lady will know that there is work ongoing with the local authorities to look at other ways of treating drug addiction, including more targeted heroin-assisted treatment. I am sure that, like me, she is pleased that more adults are leaving treatment successfully compared with 2009-10. The average waiting time in England and Wales to access treatment is now two days. On 2 October,

[Victoria Atkins]

we announced a major independent review of drugs as part of a package of measures to tackle serious violence. The review will look at a wide range of issues, including the system of support and enforcement around drug misuse, to inform our thinking about what more can be done to tackle drug harms.

Hon. Members raised the issue of alcohol dependency. The two phases of the local alcohol action areas programme, which works with a total of 52 areas across England and Wales, suggest that theft to support alcohol dependency is not as prevalent as one would imagine. Although many LAA areas have had problems with street drinking, none felt the need to take action to prevent alcohol-related thefts, interestingly. The reasons for that may be manifold, but I wanted to introduce that into the debate to ensure that hon. Members are satisfied that we have looked into it and will continue to do so.

Many hon. Members spoke about shoplifting of items with a value of less than £200. I will take a moment to clarify the law on that, because there appears to have been a misunderstanding. I am delighted that this debate gives us the opportunity to clarify the law. In 2014, we changed the law to enable cases of theft from a shop of goods of a value of £200 or less to be dealt with as swiftly and efficiently as possible. The changes enable certain cases to be dealt with as summary-only offences, so they can be prosecuted. The simple offence of theft is triable either way—in other words, in the magistrates court or the Crown court. We have said that shoplifting offences of values of less than £200 can be tried only in the magistrates court in order to speed up the process, in terms of defendants choosing trial by jury.

That procedural change was designed to improve proportionality and lay the groundwork for the police to prosecute uncontested cases in the future, much as they do with some driving offences. The change has had no bearing on the ability of the Crown Prosecution Service to prosecute a person for theft from a shop, or on the courts' powers to punish offenders. An offender convicted of theft in a magistrates court can still face a penalty of up to six months' imprisonment for a single offence. I am happy to discuss that further after the debate in order to clarify people's understanding. The value of shoplifting is irrelevant, because it can still be prosecuted even if it is under £200.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak raised the issue of banning orders. We introduced a range of powers through the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014; these can be used by local agencies to redress antisocial behaviour that relates to retail crime, and can impose a range of conditions, such as banning an individual from entering a particular premises or area. Many of the powers are not limited to the police; some can also be enforced by local authorities. Again, if colleagues would like more information on how those powers can be used, I am very happy to share details after the debate. The more we can help our partners across local government and elsewhere to use those powers, the better I suspect it will be for our local communities.

I absolutely understand why the right hon. Member for Delyn and many others have asked the Government to consider introducing a new offence of attacks on shop staff. As he is aware from our previous discussions,

powers are already available to the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to deal with this type of offending and provide protection to retail staff. There are a number of criminal offences available to cover a wide variety of unacceptable behaviour, ranging from abusive and threatening language to offences against the person. In addition, the independent Sentencing Council is planning to consult on a revised guideline for assaults during the summer. The call for evidence presents us with another opportunity to understand how the current legislation is being applied. I am very keen to look at the efficacy of community schemes, which were mentioned by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central and others. At the end of the call for evidence, I am very happy to see what it suggests.

I am very grateful to hon. Members for what has been an interesting and important debate on retail crime. As well as hearing concerns, we have heard about the positive work that is going on in response to retail crime. Although much more can be done to reduce such crime, there is much that we can take heart from in the efforts of a range of communities, organisations and partners to respond to this problem. I know that we all share a common aim to create safer communities for the public we serve, and that, once again, we all thank our local shops and convenience stores, which are open at all sorts of hours of the day and night in order to provide us with a pint of milk, our dinner after a late day at work or a bit of chocolate when we need cheering up. All shops play an incredibly important role in our local communities, and I join hon. Members in thanking them all.

3.48 pm

David Hanson: I thank you for chairing the second part of the debate, Mr Wilson, and your colleague Mr Robertson for chairing the earlier part.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members for attending on what has been a busy afternoon and for contributing. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones). Can it be only last Thursday that real people in Newport put crosses on bits of paper to send her to this place? It is a great privilege to have her here. She may have made more, but I have seen her make at least two contributions already this week. I welcome her, and I am pleased that she is here. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for their contributions. The Minister responded, and I know that there is a working co-operation between us, but there are real issues about the level of theft and violence.

I have asked for the collection of statistics. I have asked for the consideration of legislation. I have asked for support for neighbourhood policing. I have asked for reviews of drug and alcohol work. I have asked for the prioritisation of retail crime. I have asked for a review of how the £200 threshold—I understand it, because I worked on the Bill at that time—is working in practice. I have asked for the Minister to disseminate good practice across communities, and the consultation that she graciously initiated will do that. When that consultation closes on 28 June and when it is responded to in the autumn, we as Members and we as in USDAW, the Co-op Group, the British Retail Consortium, the Association of Convenience Stores, the National Federation

of Retail Newsagents, the Co-operative party outside this building and every single person on the retail frontline will be looking at what solutions can be taken from the consultation to make a difference.

“Freedom from fear” should not be a slogan; it should be a reality for the day-to-day people who work on the shop floor. Freedom from losing business and profits because of theft, which can never be stopped completely but can be reduced by active government, is an objective we should all share. I thank you for chairing

the debate, Mr Wilson, and I thank my colleagues for their contributions. I look forward to the outcome of the consultation, which I will certainly hold the Minister to account for in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered prevention of retail crime.

3.51 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 23 April 2019

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

Hormone Pregnancy Tests

11.30 am

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Expert Working Group report on hormone pregnancy tests.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am also pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), is here to respond to this debate.

To establish the context of the debate, I will begin by acknowledging the extraordinary hard work and determination of Marie Lyon, who is here with us in Westminster Hall today. She has led the campaign on behalf of the victims of hormone pregnancy tests, and alongside her husband has travelled the length and breadth of this country, and even been to Germany, to support victims.

It has been my pleasure to work with Marie since the beginning of this campaign, alongside others including Jason Farrell, who has pursued this story for Sky News from the start; Professor Neil Vargesson of Aberdeen University; and Professor Carl Heneghan and Dr Jeffrey Aronson, both of Oxford University, whose recent work is the basis of this debate.

By way of providing more background, I remind the House that Primodos, the hormone pregnancy test drug, was taken by approximately 1.5 million women in the 1960s and 1970s to test for pregnancy. The dosage contained in those Primodos tablets was 40 times the strength of an oral contraceptive that would be prescribed today. There is considerable evidence that many women who took this drug either gave birth to babies with serious deformities, or miscarried, or had stillbirths. Those babies are now in their 40s and 50s, and they have had to live a lifetime with serious disabilities.

To this day, not one Minister or one review has been able to answer some very simple questions. First, why were no official warnings issued about this drug until eight years after the first major report that indicated possible dangers? Why were some doctors still prescribing this drug for pregnant women after official warnings were issued by the Committee on Safety of Medicines? And why were some GPs able to pull out Primodos tablets from their desk drawers and hand them to women?

I secured this debate to seek answers in respect of the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency-led expert working group. That was the scientific review set up on the instruction of a former Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), following my Backbench Business Debate on this issue in 2015. He had clearly stated to us that this review would “thoroughly” consider all the evidence.

Such is the depth of concern about this issue that there have already been three debates on the expert working group’s review—this is the fourth. Each and every time, Members from across the House have urged Ministers to consider our concerns about the methodology, the independence of the panel members and the conclusions of the report. On each and every occasion, however, our concerns have been dismissed.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on the absolutely focused way in which she has conducted this campaign, with other Members here today and with Marie Lyon. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), the former Minister: it is not easy for Ministers to override the advice of their civil servants, but he did on that occasion. That, however, makes it all the more concerning that, on 24 October last year, Lord O’Shaughnessy wrote my hon. Friend a letter that was rather confusing and defensive, and did not make any reference to enforcing a rethink by the MHRA.

We know that there are issues about how the meta tests are done, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will come on to that. However, at this stage does she still find it very concerning that Ministers have not grasped the nettle?

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and I absolutely agree with him; he can probably hear in my voice some of my frustration about the fact that this issue has not been grasped by Ministers and dealt with.

In recent months, the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests, of which I am the chair, has written to Ministers several times to ask for meetings so that we can discuss these concerns, but each time our request has been declined. Perhaps the Minister here today could shed some light on what exactly the Government are so intent on hiding each time they refuse the request by a group of MPs for a meeting.

Let us not forget that the review was cloaked in secrecy from the very start. As an observer, Marie Lyon was forced to sign a “gagging clause”, which, if breached, could have resulted in a prison sentence. Families who gave evidence to the panel reported being treated appallingly by the MHRA. Despite the MHRA’s insistence that the expert working group was independent, two panel members had to be removed after Marie Lyon discovered conflicts of interest.

Perhaps the most shocking fact was that this review was set up with terms of reference that stated very clearly that it would seek to find a “possible association”, but the review panel and the Commission on Human Medicines chose to ignore that and instead concluded that a “causal association could not be found between the drug and birth defects.”

Each time that Ministers have been questioned about this review, we have been told that it was

“robust, comprehensive, independent and scientific”.

If that really is the case, I hope that the Minister can provide us with answers today as to why we now have evidence, which I will set out, that clearly proves that the expert working group review was anything but robust and comprehensive.

[Yasmin Qureshi]

Last November, a team of experts led by Carl Heneghan, the Professor of Evidence-Based Medicine at Oxford University, conducted a systematic review of all previous human studies. They discovered that when the data is pooled properly it shows “a clear association” with several different forms of malformation. The results were clear that there is an association that is significant. That tells us that the expert working group’s review completely failed to adopt the right approach for a systematic review. Why did it not pool all the data together and properly collate it to show an overall effect? I should also point out that Professor Heneghan’s study has been published in a peer review journal, whereas the expert working group’s review was not even scrutinised.

However, Professor Heneghan did not stop there. Marie Lyon obtained raw data used by the expert working group via a freedom of information request. It is worth noting that despite the MHRA’s claim of “transparency”, this data was not already in the public domain. The cynical among us might ask: why was that? Why hide it?

That raw data was then assessed by Professor Heneghan and his team, who carried out a meta-analysis on it, and again they found that there is an association between the drug and birth defects. Let me just repeat that point again—raw data used by the MHRA for the expert working group review was assessed by independent experts at Oxford University and it was found that Primodos causes deformities.

Can the Minister appreciate why that has led to suspicion that key elements of the research were removed from the report in order for the expert working group to reach its conclusion, and why campaigners feel that Ministers and Parliament may have been misled, given that it appears that key information was being withheld from the report in order to suggest that there is no link between Primodos and deformities?

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend is being gracious in allowing interventions. Does she not consider it confusing that the group, and indeed the MHRA, seem to be reluctant regarding meta-analysis, when only recently the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence used it to reinstate surgical mesh in the treatment of prolapse? It is widely understood to be a common method—the US Food and Drug Administration and the European Medicines Agency have adopted it. Why are we lagging behind? Perhaps the Minister would like to comment on that in her reply.

Yasmin Qureshi: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I come on to explain how other bodies use meta-analysis to carry out assessment.

Does the Minister understand why we are asking why the data was not even properly assessed? When I tabled a parliamentary question to inquire whether the meta-analysis of the studies had been carried out, I was told that it had not. Can the Minister explain why not? One of the experts on the panel, Professor Stephen Evans, recently made a poor defence of meta-analysis not being used in the review, by relying heavily on a paper called, “Meta-analysis. Schemata analysis”, which was published 25 years ago. The expert working group seems not to have considered meta-analysis an appropriate way in which to assess the data. Why not? Why did it refuse to take an evidence-based approach?

Neither the Minister nor I is a scientist, but she is aware that meta-analysis is the statistical procedure that combines data from multiple studies. When treatment effect is consistent from one study to the next, as with Primodos, it is completely appropriate and evidence-based to use a meta-analysis to assess the data. Pharmaceutical companies use it to approve new drugs. The US Food and Drug Administration uses it. The European Medicines Agency uses it for the approval of drugs, and clinicians and researchers in medicine, education and the criminal justice system use it to determine whether a treatment works. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence uses meta-analysis, and it is the cornerstone of Cochrane—previously known as the Cochrane Collaboration. The only group that discounts meta-analysis is the MHRA. Why? To say that meta-analysis was not the appropriate method is completely incompatible with an evidence-based approach.

Let me take up the matter of the independence of the expert working group. We have been told several times, by a number of Ministers, that the entire process was completely independent. It is my view that the Government are not well served by their current processes, the lack of independence and the lack of impartiality. What is in doubt is the question of whether the Government have the independent expertise required to hold Government bodies such as the MHRA to account and provide us with independent evidence with which to make informed decisions.

As the Minister is aware, in February 2018, Baroness Cumberlege began a joint non-scientific review into Primodos, sodium valproate and mesh implants, and we expect it to conclude in the next few months. Baroness Cumberlege invited the expert working group to give oral evidence to the review team, and this is how Ailsa Gebbie, the group’s chair, described herself at the beginning of an evidence session:

“I’m also the chair of the MHRA and the expert working group on hormones and women’s health that reviews all products and medicines and drugs related to women”.

What does independent mean if the chair describes herself in that way?

In 2015, the Commission on Human Medicines agreed to establish an expert working group to review the available data on a possible association between the hormone pregnancy test, Primodos, and adverse outcomes in pregnancy, and to make a recommendation. The commission appears to have commissioned the MHRA to do an independent review. Perhaps the independence of the MHRA can be summed up in its response to Marie Lyon, who in conversation with the agency had reminded it of its responsibility to the public interest. She was immediately corrected:

“No, the job of the MHRA is to represent Pharma”.

Of course, the agency is correct—it is substantially funded by the pharmaceutical industry and cannot be considered independent by any stretch of the imagination. Can the Minister explain why we are expected to have confidence in the independence of a review that was run by an organisation part-funded by pharma? How can we be expected to trust claims that Bayer, the manufacturer of Primodos, has no links to the MHRA? Yes, we had a review, but I am not sure we can call it independent. Will the Minister do the right thing and withdraw the expert working group report?

If the Minister needs any further evidence, perhaps I can point her to the testimony of Sandra Malcolm, a recent whistleblower. Mrs Malcolm worked for the manufacturer of Primodos, which is now owned by Bayer. While at the company in 1971, she discovered she was pregnant and spoke to colleagues:

“I was in reception one day and there were two guys there. One may have been a medical rep and he said to me ‘you want a dose of Primodos’ and the other said ‘I think it’s been taken off the market’, and the other one said ‘no, you can get it’. So with that information I went upstairs to see one of the doctors. I said ‘I’m a week overdue and can I have some Primodos?’ And he said ‘I can’t give it to you because it may not work and it may cause deformities’, so I thought that was a definite no.”

Mrs Malcolm said that after the conversation she decided not to take the drug “for obvious reasons” and that she assumed it was no longer on the market. However, many years later, when she saw a report about Primodos causing deformities, she was shocked to discover it had remained on the market for many years after problems had been listed.

Vast swathes of evidence clearly point to a cover-up by the drug company and the Government regulators at the time. It is utterly disgraceful that until this day the evidence has been ignored, as it was by the expert working group review.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, not just for securing the debate and for the way in which she has conducted it, but for her leadership on the issue over a long period. One of the more modern—I say modern; I think it was in the 19th century—versions of the Hippocratic oath is the principle, “Do no harm”. Does she agree—and she has made a powerful case for this—that as harm has been done we should acknowledge the consequences and deal with them appropriately?

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention, and I absolutely agree with him. He may have realised what the ending of my speech was going to be, because that was a point I was going to make.

Not once did the expert working group mention the historical evidence in its review; not once did it look at those documents and acknowledge that there are questions to be answered. Primodos has been the cause of devastating effects, and much of the current suffering is the result of ongoing uncertainty. We must accept that we cannot achieve certainty in all things, but we can admit our failings. Victims of Primodos need an acknowledgement of liability, and it is time that we gave them an apology. When will the Government stop wasting time and public money by setting up these so-called independent ad hoc expert working groups each time scientific evidence clearly shows that the use of Primodos caused birth defects, just so they can dismiss the evidence and continue to cover up what one lawyer has called the biggest medical and legal cover-up of the 20th century?

On behalf of my four constituents and their families, and on behalf of thousands of families across the country and over 130 members of the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests, I urge the Minister to listen to these concerns, as well as those of other Members present. I urge her to be brave, and to have the courage to say “Enough is enough.” From today, let us stop putting our heads in the sand. Let us look at the evidence that Professor Heneghan has presented, and give Primodos victims the justice they deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 1 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 12.27 pm, and the guideline limits are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party, 10 minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Yasmin Qureshi will then have three minutes at the end to wind up the debate.

We are in Back-Bench time until 12.27 pm. Six Members are seeking to contribute, so please do not speak for more than six minutes. Unhelpfully, only one of the monitors is working—the one to my right—so to assist Members, I will gesticulate at them in a friendly way when they have a minute to go.

11.52 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this vital debate on what, for many people, has been a long journey.

Sir William Osler, an eminent Canadian physician, once said:

“Medicine is the science of uncertainty and the art of probability.” My constituents who took the hormone pregnancy tests of the ’60s and ’70s, including Primodos—which was removed from the market in 1977—have to date been met with uncertainty. They placed their trust in those involved in manufacturing, testing, prescribing and dispensing—trust that in their view, and in mine, was betrayed. With dogged but dignified determination, they still seek to confirm the probability of a possible connection between those drugs and birth defects and/or fatalities.

I understand that Professor Carl Heneghan carried out a meta-analysis that backs up the findings of Professor Vargesson’s zebrafish study. While I appreciate that meta-analysis is a complex and comprehensive tool, my layman’s understanding is that it may be undertaken to review and reconcile multiple research studies on the same topic with different results. In doing so, it may uncover a study that has different results due to systematic error or bias in the research process. In response to a recent question posed by the hon. Member for Bolton South East, the individual answering on behalf of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care stated that the Commission on Human Medicines expert working group did not undertake a meta-analysis as part of its review, citing different designs, lack of robustness and the extensive limitations of studies as the reasons therefor.

Dan Mayer’s text, “Essential Evidence-Based Medicine” advises the reader:

“Some common problems with meta-analyses are that they may be comparing diverse studies with different designs or over different time periods.”

However, importantly, the author does not appear to suggest that such circumstances should automatically rule out proceeding with meta-analysis. Rather, he states that such apparent divergence may be addressed by incorporating various checks and balances as part of that analysis. It appears that professors at the University of Oxford who have had sight of data recently recovered through a freedom of information request are yet again persuaded that there is an association between hormone pregnancy tests and birth defects, thereby casting doubt on the robustness of the EWG’s work and the material that it has published to date.

[Bill Grant]

I note that the Government's response referred to the European Medicines Agency's ongoing independent review of the publication by Professor Heneghan and others, and I await the EMA's conclusions with interest. Hopefully, those conclusions will finally bring some comfort to my constituents and many others. I ask the Minister to provide greater clarity as to why meta-analysis was ruled out by the EWG, and to confirm whether the EMA's conclusions will be published next month. Finally, I make a passionate plea—which I am sure many others share—on behalf of the victims of hormone pregnancy tests in the '60s and '70s. Let us introduce honesty, openness and, above all, humanity into the long-standing journey that those individuals have been on.

11.56 am

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for having secured this important debate, and more widely for her leadership of the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests and her incredible campaigning on this issue. I pay tribute to all the families who, for many years, have been campaigning tirelessly to uncover the truth about Primodos, particularly Marie Lyon, who is an incredible campaigner. She has worked hard on this issue, and I hope we can do something to make sure we get to the truth about what happened all those years ago. I also place on record my thanks to Professors Neil Vargesson and Carl Heneghan, and to Sky News reporter Jason Farrell for his determination to get to the truth. Many of his reports have been seen by families who have come forward as a result of the testimony and campaigning of others.

One of the families affected by Primodos lives in my constituency. My constituent Steven Bagley was born severely brain-damaged after his mother was given Primodos as a hormone pregnancy test in 1967. Steven needs 24-hour care, cannot communicate, and suffers from a severe form of epilepsy, which means frequent seizures that have become steadily worse with age and happen throughout the night.

I have got to know the Bagley family over the past few years: Steven's parents Pat and Ted, and his sister Charlotte, who has been a tireless campaigner for justice for her parents and brother. She has recently moved from Southampton back to Wolverhampton to help look after Steven. His parents have lovingly looked after him for 50 years, but are now in their 80s and 70s with their own health problems, and are finding it a real struggle. What I find particularly heartbreaking about the case of my constituents, which is similar to many others, is that like other mums affected, Pat still says, "If only I hadn't taken those pills." However, she was doing what we all do: trusting our GP and following their advice. Like many others affected by Primodos, Pat was not given a prescription, but was given the pills directly by her doctor.

It is thanks to the tireless campaigning of families such as my constituents, and of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East, that the Government asked the Commission on Human Medicines to set up an expert working group to examine the scientific evidence linking Primodos to birth defects. However, from the start,

serious concerns were raised by the families, the APPG on hormone pregnancy tests, individual MPs and scientists about how that group went about its work. Those concerns have only grown as evidence of missing analysis has come to light, and questions have been asked about the methodology used.

I will raise four particular concerns about the expert working group. First, the group reinterpreted its terms of reference. It was asked to look at a possible association between the drugs and the foetal abnormalities. Despite that, it decided to look for a higher standard of proof of a causal association between Primodos and birth defects, even though it was not asked to find a causal link. It has never been clearly explained why the group chose to interpret and change the terms of reference in that way. Perhaps the Minister will reflect on that when she winds up. If not, will she take that away, consider it and come back to us?

Secondly, the report was altered before publication in several ways. Apparently the draft report, provided to Marie Lyon, stated:

"Limitations of the methodology of the time and the relative scarcity of the evidence means it is not possible to reach a definitive conclusion."

That line was removed before the final report was published. The draft also stated that

"there is insufficient evidence to determine whether taking the medications at the doses found in Primodos tablets, for two days during the first trimester of pregnancy could have reached and had an effect on the fetus."

However, in the final report, that was substantially changed. That uncertainty was replaced by the claim that the evidence indicated that any exposure

"was unlikely to have had an effect on the developing fetus."

In short, the conclusion in the draft report changed from

"the evidence is insufficient to form a conclusion",

to, in the final report,

"the evidence does not support a causal association".

Again, there has been no satisfactory explanation for those changes. Will the Minister reflect on that in her winding-up speech or go back to the Department and convey to us why the changes were made?

Thirdly, there was no consideration of possible regulatory failures at the time Primodos was given to mothers by doctors as a hormone pregnancy test. That seems to be a huge omission. Will the Minister explain why such a vital question was excluded? It would surely help us to understand what concerns were raised or should have been raised about Primodos at the time.

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She is taking us necessarily into the past. What we know about the past is that how the drugs were marketed in the 1960s and 1970s would be totally unacceptable today. Does she not find it concerning that the context of how the drugs were delivered has not been looked at properly by the report? Some of the potential consequences of that, such as what women took as gospel from doctors, have not been addressed either.

Emma Reynolds: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is incredible that the burden of proof seems to rest on the families. That is what is being suggested in debates—not our debates, but others—but the burden of proof actually lies with the pharmaceutical company that made the

products in the first place and did not do the testing required. The drugs subsequently had horrific effects on the babies who were born, yet we still have not got a Government or a Minister to accept that there is a link. We are looking for the truth to be uncovered.

I am conscious of time and your advice, Mr Hollobone, but allow me to make a fourth point about the expert working group. The credibility of the group has been further undermined in the eyes of the families and of the Members here today by its not including a meta-analysis—a pooling of all the data from previous studies. It is not clear whether such a meta-analysis was carried out and not divulged, or was just not done. Marie Lyon obtained the raw data used by the expert working group through a freedom of information request. Professor Carl Heneghan of Oxford University used the working group's own data and found strikingly similar conclusions to his review. Both reviews showed significant associations of the use of Primodos with all congenital malformations and congenital heart defects. Both systematic reviews show that the use of Primodos in pregnancy is associated with increased risk of congenital malformations.

In conclusion, we know that Baroness Cumberlege is carrying out a wider review into independent medicines and medical devices safety. I place on the record my thanks to her and her team for listening to the testimony of Pat and Ted Bagley and their daughter Charlotte. For the first time, they feel like they have been heard and listened to sympathetically. I hope that the Cumberlege review will get to the truth of what happened, but before we do that, it would be useful for the Government and the Minister to get to the truth of why the expert working group has presented the evidence in such a way and to respond to the concerns I have expressed. The sooner we get to the truth of what happened in the '60s and '70s with Primodos tablets—they were taken not only by expectant mums in our country, but by others in countries around the world—the better.

12.5 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a pleasure to be involved in this debate, to be part of one of the largest all-party parliamentary groups in the House, and to look after my constituents and speak for them and the others who have been so dramatically affected. They trusted the NHS and the drug company and so thought that the drug they were taking was safe. As was suggested, these ladies went to their GP surgery perhaps because they had missed their period or had some of the other symptoms of pregnancy. It was such an important time in their lives. Often the GP just opened a drawer, gave them the tablets and said, "This will tell you whether you are pregnant or not." There were no pamphlets and no advice, even though the risks were known to nearly everyone, apart from those ladies who took those tablets.

In this excellent debate, we have touched on a lot of the science. I am not a scientist or a lawyer; I am just a dad who is trying to help out some constituents in this area and as part of the group. In the debate that followed the publication of this so-called independent review, I said that it was a whitewash, but it was not; it was a cover-up, and we have to discover what is being covered up. Is it the legal side of the NHS giving a drug to a woman on its premises when it knew there was not only a risk, but an effect? Is it the drug company having

undue influence on the report, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, the Department of Health and Social Care, or a bit of everything?

I say to the Minister that this is not about this Government, but Governments. The issue was being discussed when I was the shadow public health Minister, not least by thalidomide campaigners. They were supportive of this campaign, and they had to rely extensively on evidence that was there, but that the Government and the drug companies had ignored over the years.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Is it not the case that we do not need to be lawyers or medical experts to realise that a drug that is 40 times the strength of the contraceptive pill—it was being given in such countries as Germany as an abortive—would surely have profound impacts on unborn fetuses, or children who were born after their mothers had taken Primodos?

Sir Mike Penning: No one in this room or anyone listening to this debate could disagree with that, unless they were a lawyer working for the drug company, the Department of Health and Social Care, or perhaps both.

Believe it or not, Mr Hollobone, 70% of me, you and anyone else in the room is the same as a zebrafish. I swim really well, but I did not realise that until this morning. We chuckle, but the point is that the effects of an experiment on zebrafish will be similar to those on a human being. There are many studies, but the link is important. Professor Neil Vargesson's report in 2018 supported Professor Heneghan's report. What does that mean? We all know about the disgrace of thalidomide. Through experimentation on zebrafish, it was proven that thalidomide damaged children. We do not want to experiment on humans. It appears that that is exactly what has gone on here. It is obvious that the mechanism of the action of thalidomide is the same as that shown by the Primodos tests. Everybody can read the technical stuff. There was an effect on zebrafish, who share 70% of their genes with humans. Does that mean it could have had an effect on humans? Of course it does; it is not rocket science.

Gordon Marsden: The right hon. Gentleman is taking us through the history. Does he not agree with me that it is extraordinary? We need to remember the chronology. The thalidomide episode took place in the 1960s and was exposed by *The Sunday Times* and Harold Evans in a great step forward, but the drugs continued to be supplied afterwards. Even now, 40 years later, there is, in the statement of Lord O'Shaughnessy, doubt about whether such things should still be used. We should surely say that they should not be used.

Sir Mike Penning: I cannot understand how a drug company, now owned by Bayer, could know what was going on and continue to supply the drug in an underhand way to GPs. As a father—as a human being—I simply do not understand it. What on earth was going on? The MHRA, which gave evidence to us, was in complete denial. We did not ask for a cause. I was lucky enough to be a Minister in seven Departments. If I had said, "This is the review that you are going to do, and these are your terms of reference," and those terms of reference were changed by the review group without my permission, I would have smelled a rat. I would have thought something was going wrong.

[Sir Mike Penning]

We can go through all the science, which cannot be denied. I do not blame any Minister—I can feel the special advisers' eyes on my back—but something went dramatically wrong, and it has been covered up by several Governments. That must stop now. If compensation has to be paid, fine. Most of the families simply want an apology. Why is there no apology? Because there would then be the threat of legal action. Mistakes happen. When we make mistakes, we should admit it, no matter what Government are in power. We should sort it. We did that over Hillsborough when I was a Minister in the Home Office. It was a really difficult decision to make, but we made it, and the right conclusion was reached. That should be the case in this instance.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am afraid I will have to impose a five-minute limit on speeches, or we will run out of time.

12.12 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this debate, and on all the work she has done on this subject.

In the small geographic area of Makerfield, I probably have the most constituents affected. There are at least eight, including Marie Lyon, who has been a wonderful chair of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests and a tireless campaigner. Whenever I have tried to speak to Marie about any issues, she has been restricted by an incredibly strict gagging agreement. I have asked questions and she has said, "I can't answer that. I can't mention that. I can't give you any information about that." Why can she not give me, her Member of Parliament, the information that I need?

Minutes of meetings have been recorded, but were destroyed straight after. Marie has told me that they do not reflect her notes. Positive comments have been left out, and some of the minutes have been changed after her intervention. That is surely not normal practice.

I have heard the same story as many of my hon. Friends here: constituents were given tablets from an office drawer in the doctor's desk. The women have lived with the consequences and the guilt of taking the tablets. One mother was told that her son's severe mental and physical disability was probably her fault, and she had no more children. That has stayed with me, because she said to me, "We have such a lot of love to give." She and her husband, who has sadly died, dedicated their lives to looking after their son. She is now worried about what will happen when she is gone, and that is why it is so important that we get to the truth. We want proof that she has been let down by the people she trusted. The statement made on behalf of the MHRA that families could already have had previous congenital abnormalities is appalling. The statement was made by a representative who had worked with a leading member of the expert working group and who would have been aware of his conclusions. Again, it raises issues about impartiality, independence and people who all know each other working together.

Women already blame themselves, and that is simply reinforced. Throughout the whole sorry affair, attempts have been made to shift the blame to women. It has been said that they did not want to be pregnant and used

the tablet as a means of aborting. That was emphatically not the case with my constituents, who were delighted to think they could be pregnant. The study clearly places the blame where it should lie: with the manufacturers and distributors of Primodos, who were aware of the potential effects of the drug long before it was withdrawn in the UK. It was not withdrawn for commercial reasons, and the withdrawal of the indication of pregnancy was strongly requested by the Standing Joint Committee, which threatened to take Primodos off the market if the indication was not removed.

Looking at the review, I believe Professor Heneghan fully answered all the questions. His persistence shows how much he believes in the conclusions in his review, and in a demonstrable link between hormone pregnancy tests and foetal abnormalities, which obviously differ depending on the stage of development at which the test was administered. The families have been failed throughout the process, right from the moment that they were given the pill, often from the doctor's desk drawer. There is now an opportunity to give some peace of mind and redress to the families, but yet again there is a cloak of secrecy and obstruction, and they feel let down by the agencies in place to protect them.

12.16 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this hugely important debate. I congratulate her not only on winning this debate, but on the way in which she forensically exposed the failings of the expert working group—how it changed the terms of reference of the inquiry; its failure to report properly, if at all, on its meta-analysis findings; and the serious questions about the independence and impartiality of the group. She finished by rightly describing the issue as the biggest legal and medical cover-up of the 20th century, but that cover-up has individual victims.

I have met Wendy Brown, a constituent from the Isle of Mull, on numerous occasions. She knows that her disability was brought on by her mother's use of Primodos when pregnant. Wendy has been a formidable campaigner for the victims of Primodos over the years, and last week she wrote to me, saying:

"My hands and both feet are deformed, which was very hard as a child due to the constant bullying. I also had damage to my neck at birth and was baptised at home as I wasn't expected to live. The older I am getting the more...pain I am in, especially in my feet which can really wear me down, as no matter what shoes I get they are always painful. I am now getting a very painful wrist, which is due to the way I have held my hand in order to conceal it because it has unnatural motion. This is a growing concern for me because...I work in the Post Office in Tobermory and am not sure how much longer I could keep going."

That is the day-to-day reality of people living with the effect of Primodos.

Wendy and other members of the campaign group rightly demand justice. We owe it to Wendy and all the other victims never to abandon them in their fight for justice. It is scandalous that the people whose lives have been so badly affected and who, day in and day out, have to live with the physical, social, emotional and psychological pain are being denied natural justice. They will continue to be denied natural justice as long as the United Kingdom's medical establishment continues to deny the link between hormone pregnancy tests and serious foetal abnormalities.

If justice is to be seen to be done, surely it is time for a statutory inquiry, similar to that for the contaminated blood scandal, in which every single piece of evidence is examined forensically and transparently. If the Government are so sure of their case, they have nothing to fear from such an inquiry. At the very least, it would restore public trust in a system in which it is lacking right now.

Sir Mike Penning: The key is for evidence sessions to happen under oath. That is what we called for in the House, and what should happen now.

Brendan O'Hara: I wholeheartedly agree; they have to be under oath. Justice would also be served if the Secretary of State were to appear before the Health and Social Care Committee to answer detailed questions about the way the inquiry was conducted, and to explain and defend its findings.

I sincerely hope that the Government are not simply playing for time with this scandal, hoping that in time it will go away. Thankfully, there are people in this House, such as the hon. Member for Bolton South East, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), and many others in the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests, who will not allow that to happen.

Finally, I put on the record my thanks to the members of the APPG for their work to continue to shine a light where some vested interests would rather one not be shone, and for their tireless work in advocating strongly for justice for the victims of Primodos and other hormone pregnancy tests.

12.21 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I agree with all colleagues who have spoken. My friend, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), is right about a cover-up. He could have gone further; there is a danger that it is a criminal cover-up. I say that to the Minister in all gravity, because if she and her colleagues do not get on top of this issue, it will end up in the courts. The Government and the medical establishment will be defeated, and a lot of money will have to be paid. It will be a national scandal. It is one already, but it is not as well known as it ought to be. It will be on the front pages. I say to the Minister that it is time to act.

When I last spoke on this subject, on 14 December 2017, I used material from the Berlin archives, thanks to the amazing Marie Lyon and the Sky journalist Jason Farrell. I showed that lawyers and the scientific advisers from Schering knew about this in the 1960s. Minutes from meetings in '68 and '69 showed that they knew that there were problems, and that they would be found guilty in a court of law. I used long-standing evidence that the people involved knew there was a problem.

Today, I will focus on the science—first, on the association between HPTs and deformity, and secondly, on the issue of causal links. The 2017 expert working group report said that there was not an association. It is interesting, however, that when members of the EWG gave evidence to the review, they had a different story. The Minister needs to think about why that is. Professor Stephen Evans, for example, in evidence on 28 January 2019, at 28 minutes and 46 seconds into the video, said that

“Dr Olszynko-Gryn says this: ‘More optionally the authors’—this is Heneghan... ‘the authors might consider reflecting on the extent

to which the association they identify implies a causal association. An association between the use of HPTs and birth defects has long been recognised and was rarely in dispute.’ Well, we don’t dispute that; there is an association.”

He did not say that in 2017. Ailsa Gebbie from the EWG, at the same oral hearing, said:

“But everybody admits there is a possible association, and that’s why the report was carried out in the first place.”

I think it is more than a possible association.

Let us go to the meta-analysis that has been quoted, which is where lots of studies are brought together to see whether together they tell a consistent story. I am not a scientist or a mathematician, but I have spoken to academics who really understand this. They say that when the studies are brought together, their homogeneity, and the consistency of the findings, is extraordinarily striking. They all show an association.

The EWG wants to dismiss that. Professor Evans does not want to accept that methodology. As we heard from the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), Professor Evans is going against the Food and Drug Administration—the US authorities—the European Medicines Agency, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and clinical researchers in this area across the world, who accept meta-analysis for this type of risk analysis. The Minister needs to ask her officials why the EWG refuses to accept the analysis, because it is strong, overwhelming and proves the case, I personally think, in legal terms, beyond reasonable doubt. The Minister must leave the Chamber knowing that there is an association, because that is what the science shows.

We have heard about the desire for a causal link to be shown. I urge the Minister to ask her experts and officials what is needed to prove a direct causal link. That test is very rarely met. If a recognised poison that is known to be lethal is given to someone, they will die; that is a binary issue. However, most other pharmaceuticals and drugs are not like that. The balance of probabilities is the test that is normally used. All the evidence that we have shows that, on the balance of probabilities, there is no doubt that there is a link.

It is sometimes difficult to show causalities. It has been suggested to me that I mention the Fairchild case, to show how difficult it is to establish causation. The Fairchild exception is a relaxation of normal tests for causation. A mesothelioma victim can prove that a particular exposure to asbestos caused the mesothelioma by proving that the exposure was such as to create a material increase in risk of the victim contracting the disease.

Has a material risk been proven? According to the meta-analysis, there is a 40% increase in risk of all malformations from taking HPTs. There is an 89% increase in risk of congenital heart malformations—more than a doubling. I say that because a doubling of a risk is material in court. There is nearly three times the risk of nervous system malformation. There is a 224% increase in risk of musculoskeletal malformation, and a 747% risk of vertical defects. That is what the evidence shows. I bring that to the Minister’s attention. She must know that. She should go back to the Department and challenge her officials, because they are getting this wrong and letting people down.

12.27 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I give huge credit to Marie Lyon and all the campaigners from the Primodos group; I have got to know them very well in the four years since I was elected in 2015. I have rarely met a more tireless and dedicated group. The same goes for the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi). She, with her staff, has run the all-party parliamentary group with incredible veracity and determination, and it is a pleasure to be part of that. I also give credit to Jason Farrell of Sky, who recently did a documentary on the impacts of Primodos, shining a light where no one else, frankly, has gone.

I have campaigned for my constituent Wilma Ord and her daughter Kirsteen, who was born deaf and with cerebral palsy. Like so many women, as many Members have mentioned, Wilma believed that the deformities that her child was born with were her own fault. Let us call it out for what it is. As the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) said, there was a criminal cover-up. Some 1.5 million women were treated as human guinea pigs for the pursuit of profit by the company Schering, now Bayer. I hope that it is listening today.

I know that the Minister and the Government are listening. There is clearly consensus, the likes of which few of us will have seen, across the House on this issue. We are not going away, the campaigners are not going away, and this issue is not going away. Until I am no longer the elected Member of Parliament for Livingston, I will campaign on this issue and pursue it, as I know everybody in the Chamber will.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, am pleased that this debate is happening, but I am really sad and frustrated to be here. I have re-read my speech from our October 2016 debate, at which I think all hon. Members in this Chamber were present. I spoke about two constituents who had been affected.

Most of the speeches in that debate articulately raised such cases, but basically they were asking for a process to find answers. Three years later, we have fewer answers and most of us are more suspicious and angry. On that basis alone, this cannot be the end of the matter. I thoroughly agree with the hon. Lady's comments.

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree. I share the hon. Gentleman's despair and sadness that we are in this position so many years after the group was set up—a process into which the Government put public money and in which medical experts took part. As I have said, we are not necessarily criticising the people in the expert working group, who are medical professionals, but they have fallen victim to a process that was at best opaque and at worst corrupt, given the influence of the companies involved.

Who knows why we ended up in this mess? On the day the report was due to be published, the hon. Member for Bolton South East and I went to an event that we thought was supposed to be public—or at least open to Members of Parliament. We were stopped at the door; some of the press were allowed in, but we were not. We know that there was due to be a press conference and a public event, but they were both cancelled.

Members have spoken passionately about the lack of independence and impartiality, the gagging clause that Marie Lyon had to sign and the heavy-handed

approach taken, all of which have caused serious concerns. What does it say to those in the medical community who may be invited to be part of future Government working groups that a group that was supposed to be open and transparent and get to the truth of an issue has turned out to be a cover-up? It raises serious concerns that their credibility will be called into question. That is a very dangerous situation.

As well as looking at the wider issue, we need to look at the mess that the expert group became, so that we can give confidence not only to the families and to our constituents, but to medical professionals.

Gordon Marsden: The hon. Lady points out precisely the contextual things that we need to learn. Does she agree that there seems to have been an element of Jekyll and Hyde in the Government's approach over the past three years? On the positive side, I have confidence that Baroness Cumberlege—with whom I have served on another all-party group—and her team are moving in the right direction. However, everything in the statement that the then Secretary of State made in February 2018 was about the future:

“drive forward...the recommendations of the expert working group...offering the families...a full and up-to-date genetic clinical evaluation...better training and support for obstetricians”.—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 165-166.]

Those are all good things, but they do not address the past 40 years, offer an apology or express any sense of regret, nor do they address any of the issues raised in this debate. Would it not be a good idea for the Minister to go back to the Secretary of State and say that we need to look again at that 2018 statement, go back to that context and make the necessary decisions? People will not put up with just a broad range of recommendations—we need to get to the heart of the matter.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. How many times must the families and the victims of Primodos have their hopes built up and then completely dashed? Is it not bad enough that they have gone through the trauma, the blame and having their children live with deformities and disabilities—as my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) so precisely and devastatingly highlighted in the case of his constituent—without also having their hopes built up for a review that turns out to be a whitewash? That gives people no confidence at a time when, let's be honest, confidence in politicians and the political process is not particularly good. We have an opportunity here to do something good, to do it well and to do it properly.

I have to say that my exchanges with the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency and with the expert working group have not been good. I wrote directly to the chair of the expert working group about people's feelings and concerns, but the response that I received did not fill me with hope.

I am pleased that Baroness Cumberlege has taken on her new role of looking at hormone pregnancy tests, sodium valproate and medical mesh, but when she sought evidence, she did not include Scotland. I have now written to her, and that issue has been rectified, but it is important to remember all the devolved nations of the UK and ensure that they are appropriately included. We know what the academic studies have shown—the work of Carl Heneghan and Neil Vargesson has been

exceptional—but there is now new evidence and we should ensure that it is included in any future plans or reviews.

What we need from the Minister is an acknowledgment of the power of the views across this Chamber and across both Houses, and of the serious impact of this issue on people's lives. How many parents need to die without knowing what happened to their children because of a pill that they took? As the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said, these were women who believed that they were in the care of the NHS, that they were being given something that had been properly medically checked, and that they were not being put in danger. However, their health and the health of their unborn children were put in danger. Let us not forget that many women miscarried—there are many children who were not born because their mothers took this pill. This drug was used in Germany as an abortive and in another country as a pregnancy test. It does not take an expert to work out that that was absolutely wrong.

We have a choice, and we have an opportunity. There is a very powerful body of medical evidence that needs to be properly looked at. The Government also need to take a long, hard look in the mirror and think very carefully about why the expert working group failed so badly and why its terms of reference changed part of the way through. They need to make sure that that never happens again; that the victims of Primodos, including my constituent and all the constituents mentioned today, never have to go through any more pain and suffering; and that those victims will get truth, justice and answers to their questions. Do they need compensation? Yes, absolutely, but what they really want is an apology and an acknowledgment.

As the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead said, when something goes wrong, the right thing to do is put your hands up and say, "Do you know what? We got this wrong." It is about time that that happened. I hope that now the Minister and her Government will finally do the right thing.

12.37 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Like other hon. Members, I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this debate. I also thank Marie Lyon, chair of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests. Without those two strong, brave women and their pursuit of justice, truth and answers, we would probably not be having this debate. I think we can all agree that the personal stories that we have heard today are very powerful indeed, and that these people and their families deserve definitive answers to their questions, especially after so many years.

Although I am pleased that the Government have committed to the ongoing review, I hope that on this occasion all available data will be analysed and all research will be taken into account, so that the review's conclusion can satisfy those who have campaigned so vociferously for so many years. It is alarming to read the report from experts at Oxford University, led by Carl Heneghan, Professor of Evidence-Based Medicine. The report appears to identify huge gaps in the expert working group's 2017 study.

To find that huge areas of research were left untouched is nothing short of an insult to the campaigners who have devoted their lives to seeking justice. Some reports suggest that key elements of research were removed on purpose to support the conclusion and mislead Government and Parliament. If so, we as parliamentarians must do our utmost to right those wrongs; I hope that today the Minister will pledge to do just that. Indeed, the Prime Minister herself said in January that she would

"listen very carefully to any recommendations that come out of the review".—[*Official Report*, 16 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 1160.]

The results of animal testing from a 1979 study released by the pharmaceutical manufacturer Schering, now owned by Bayer, found strong links between the drugs and malformations, as well as the death of embryos, and yet the expert working group in 2017 declared that those results provided insufficient evidence. The expert working group examined human studies, and the majority similarly favoured an association between Primodos and deformity, but still the working group felt that the evidence was not strong enough. Was the evidence not properly assessed, or was it simply omitted? Either way, that conclusion has undoubtedly prolonged the agony of those who have lived for 50 years without answers.

There has been much talk about whether meta-analysis should have been used by the expert working group in 2017. When Professor Heneghan carried out a random-effects meta-analysis, the results were opposite to that of the expert working group report and found that there was an association between the drug and the malformations, which was consistent with his own study.

Sir Edward Davey: I think I am right in saying that when the raw data that the expert working group had used was rerun by Professor Heneghan, it showed that if the expert working group had done that, it would have reached similar conclusions. That makes the group's conclusions even more worrying.

Paula Sherriff: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, which gives further credibility to the view that the review by the expert working group was completely insufficient.

One thing that I have been utterly appalled about during my research on this subject is the inhumane and patronising way in which women were treated and spoken about during the period that Primodos and other hormone pregnancy tests were available, and subsequently, when a possible link between the drugs, early abortions and birth defects was identified. As the chair and founder of the APPG on women's health, I am often asked why I feel it necessary to have a group that looks exclusively at women's health. This is a prime example of the inequality that women have faced over the years when they have sought help on major health issues.

One senior medical officer from the Committee on Safety of Medicines said in 1969:

"It is somewhat difficult to summon up enough enthusiasm to place a high priority on this, when so much other and possibly more important work is pressing."

In 1968, Dr N.M.B. Dean, of the Royal College of General Practitioners, stated:

"With regard to the rather high incidence of abortions in the Primodos group, I think it must be borne in mind that women going to their doctor for this type of test often hope that they are not pregnant and it is not impossible that these women took other steps to terminate their pregnancies".

Emma Reynolds: Those quotes are breathtakingly horrific. My constituent gave birth in the late 1960s to Steven, who had severe abnormalities thanks to Primodos, and she then went on to conceive two healthy daughters. My constituent wanted to be pregnant, and she wanted a family.

Paula Sherriff: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Time has not been a healer in this case. We need to understand what has happened and we need to get answers for the affected groups.

The quote from Dr Dean goes on:

“In view of these findings tentative though they are, it would be my own view that, since there is in any event no very sound medical reason (in my opinion) for the use of such hormonal preparations, Primodos should be withdrawn from use.”

To suggest that women going through the pain of dealing with a miscarriage had perhaps taken steps to terminate their pregnancies is nothing short of abhorrent, especially given that Dr Dean went on to suggest that Primodos should be withdrawn from use. That indicates that he did see a link between the drug and the miscarriages. Sadly, the suggestion was completely ignored.

Then there are the poor women whose babies had such severe health issues that they did not survive. Reports from those women include the following:

“1971: the words ‘Monster child’ were written on my medical notes. My baby was born alive. I was not allowed to see her. I was drugged. My baby was taken away. I never saw her again.

1971: Anencephaly. Stillborn 2 weeks early. No funeral allowed. Not allowed to name her. My daughter was put in a coffin with a stranger. Searched for 18 years to find where her remains had been left.

1973: I was 16. Just married and excited about my first baby. Just before my baby was born the doctor said my baby did not have a properly formed head. She had no skull and no brain and would die at birth. I was then heavily sedated and my waters broken. I tried to wake up when my baby was born and begged to see her. They refused as her birth defects were too distressing to see.”

I am sure we all agree that those reports are nothing short of heartbreaking. They are incredibly demeaning for the women involved.

To be put through the most horrendous of situations and made to suffer for all these years without answers has been like a life sentence for some, and those living with complex disabilities face an uncertain future without carers or financial support, should their loved ones die before them. If Primodos and other pregnancy hormone tests were to blame, the answers need to come now, and financial support needs to be given before it really is too late to help those living day to day with the effects of innocently taking a drug after putting their trust in clinicians and drug companies all those years ago.

On listening to stories from those affected and researching the issue, the greatest point that sticks with me is the uncertainty that surrounds all the reports that have been published—the lack of evidence used, the lack of research analysed, the lack of questions answered. I think 50 years is long enough for campaigners to wait. I hope that the Minister will today pledge that she will ensure an end to that wait, and that she will make sure that the findings of the latest review, when published, are acted on thoroughly and comprehensively.

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank all hon. Members who have participated in the debate, with real passion and determination to get to the truth. I fully accept the perception held by all Members present that we have waited a long time for answers.

One of the reasons I have pushed so hard for the Cumberlege review is exactly those arguments that have been made here this morning. It is important that everybody who has been affected is able to get answers. We have heard lots of talk today about a cover-up, and there clearly needs to be confidence in the review's outcome. That is why I wanted Baroness Cumberlege to take an objective look at exactly what has happened, as well as recognising that the way in which the regulatory system has dealt with concerns has seemed very inhumane, process-driven and extremely insensitive to patients. The response on issues of patient safety must be improved. I am really looking forward to receiving Baroness Cumberlege's recommendation in that regard, because so many people's experiences have been entirely unsatisfactory. I know that she has considered the evidence brought to her by Marie Lyon and Jason Farrell. I will be taking the recommendations extremely seriously and I hope that she can draw some conclusions on where everything has gone wrong.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and others raised the issue of the independence of the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. It is entirely appropriate that regulators are funded by the community that they regulate, through fees. That in itself does not lead to questions on the regulator's independence, but we need to offer some challenge in order to see whether the processes have sufficient integrity in terms of the response on issues of patient safety. I do not think we tackle the question of independence solely by shifting the funding on to taxpayers. It is entirely appropriate that the industry should meet the cost of regulation, but the review will bring some conclusions on whether that medical regulation is operating properly.

While we await the review's conclusions, we have had the expert working group. It is clear that hon. Members are not entirely confident in the processes and conclusions of that group. To put the work in context, the group gathered evidence from around the world and met seven times over an 18-month period. It concluded unanimously that the totality of the data reviewed did not support a causal association between Primodos and adverse pregnancy outcomes. It also did not conclude that there was not, and we clearly need to consider any further evidence when it is brought forward.

Hannah Bardell: I appreciate the comments that the Minister is making. She must recognise that the MHRA had ultimate control over what the expert working group saw, and that many documents that Sky's Jason Farrell had uncovered in Berlin and which Members have cited were not included in the work of the EWG. We need a fully transparent review—as the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said—under oath. Does she agree that that would be sensible?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I come back to my opening comments: we brought forward the Cumberlege review to give an independent challenge to what is currently

being done by a regulatory system. We need to look at whether that system is appropriate, given the concerns.

Gordon Marsden: The Minister is being very generous with her time. She is seeking to persuade us, perfectly reasonably, that she and the Government have been acting in a measured way to try to look into all these things. As I have said, we welcome Baroness Cumberlege's report. Has the Minister at any time asked the members of the expert working group why they changed the definition that they were given?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am not satisfied that that is actually what happened. When we receive drafts of reports that are circulated to committees, they often go through amendment.

Let me continue going through the chronology of events. As I said, the evidence did not support a causal association, nor did it disprove one. We will of course continue to review evidence as it arises.

Sir Mike Penning: I think this is a really fundamental point. I apologise if it seems like I am going to give the Minister a hard time, but I am. They were not asked to look for a causal link; they were asked to look for an association, and we have now seen evidence that they knew it was there. I know what happens when the notes are written for the Minister. They were not asked to look for a causal link, but for an association. They decided among themselves to change what they were supposed to look at, which is why they came out with the results that they did. That is a really fundamental point.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I hear what my right hon. Friend says. There has to be some element of cause, otherwise there is no scientific basis for a judgment. I will have to agree to disagree with him on that point.

Sir Edward Davey: I have to intervene on the Minister on that point. In many cases, drugs are looked at on the probability of risk, not on causality. Causality is a much stronger test. In science, it is very difficult to prove. If her officials are telling her that about a causal link, they are wrong. I urge her to get separate independent advice on that.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The drugs are no longer available because of association, due precisely to that balance of risk. The issue that we are looking at now is to what extent that was understood at the time, and to what extent there is a liability. That is what the group is ready to look at.

Sir Edward Davey: The Minister is being very generous with her time. I refer her to the evidence that was in the Berlin archives, which goes back to 1968 and 1969, and to the meta-analysis, which proves that on the balance of probabilities there is no doubt. That became known not this year, but years ago.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am answering on behalf of the working group. That is an independent process and I will try to do my best. The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the meta-analysis and the suggestion that Parliament has been misled about why that was not done. The expert working group discussed the merits of doing a meta-analysis at its fifth meeting. In its view,

the studies were very different, not sufficiently robust and suffered from extensive limitations. The group concluded that conducting a meta-analysis was not the most appropriate way to analyse this type of study. Instead, the group developed a set of quality criteria and presented its assessment of each study in a series of plots. To reconfirm, the data was not considered sufficiently robust for meta-analysis to be used. One of the real problems we have is that we are talking about data that, as we have mentioned, is 50 years old and not sufficiently robust.

There have been some suggestions that the expert working group has been less than transparent. In line with the Government's commitment to publish the report of the review and all the evidence considered by the group, all documents have been available for public scrutiny since November 2017. We have been very grateful for the involvement of Marie Lyon throughout that process.

There has been some criticism of the lack of an external peer review of the expert working group report. The Government's independent scientific advisory body on the safety of medicines, the Commission on Human Medicines, acts as the peer reviewer for all expert working groups. It reviewed the draft report on two occasions before it was published. I know that Baroness Cumberlege will be looking at whether there has been sufficient peer review of that report, and I look forward to receiving her recommendations. As with any issue, new evidence can emerge in the meantime. I reassure the House that the Government have made a commitment to review any important new evidence, and we have honoured that commitment.

Emma Reynolds: The Minister said a moment ago that the crux of the matter is what was known at the time about the balance of risks. Will she look at international comparisons? In other countries, this hormone pregnancy test was banned much earlier than it was in the UK.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I hear what the hon. Lady says. We have taken this work forward with the working group and have been looking at the totality of evidence around the world, particularly in Europe. Last year, Ministers asked the MHRA to convene a group of experts who have been completely without any agenda on this issue in the past, to consider the work by Professor Vargesson and ensure that it was sufficiently independent. That work, which has been referred to, concluded that Primodos caused malformations in zebrafish embryos. We have also asked for an independent European-level review of that evidence to be undertaken, so that everyone can have more confidence in the outcome. Both the UK and European reviews concluded that the results of the zebrafish study had no implications for the conclusions of the expert working group's report, and the findings of both reviews have been published.

I turn finally to the data published by Professor Heneghan. Although this analysis does not contain any new data, it found the use of hormone pregnancy tests in pregnancy is associated with a small increased risk of certain congenital malformations. The Government have therefore asked for a completely new expert group to be convened in order to consider Professor Heneghan's work, and for a review to be conducted in parallel with the European review. Those reviews are ongoing, and I look forward to receiving that advice.

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

I appreciate that I have not been able to satisfy all the representations made by right hon. and hon. Members this morning. As I said, the Government will continue to review evidence in this area. We are still considering the evidence from Professor Heneghan, and we look forward to implementing any recommendations that Baroness Cumberlege brings forward in this regard.

12.58 pm

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), my hon. Friends the Members for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), and the right hon. Members for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) for his helpful interventions.

I am very disappointed with the response the Minister has given. The questions and interventions that my colleagues have voiced suggest their disappointment as well. She has said what all the Ministers have been saying, which is basically reading out the civil service line—Sir Humphrey-speak. We have raised a number of serious questions. We raised the constitution of the expert working group—the people who sat on the panel. In meetings I had with the then Minister—the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—and civil servants, we sat and discussed what they would be looking at. They assured us that all the documents and available evidence would be looked at. Clearly, some of it has not been looked at, yet there is no promise to look at all the evidence in this case.

The scientific studies by Professor Vargesson have been mentioned. As the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead said, the human body shares about 70% of the genetic code of the zebrafish. They were found to be damaged. Most of us listening to the Minister are just gobsmacked by what we are being told. None of the issues that have been raised today has really been taken on board.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Waste Water Treatment Works: Odour Nuisance

1 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered odour nuisance from waste water treatment works.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I recognise that it could be the source of some humour to be discussing a somewhat malodorous whiff or a pungent, noxious odour in the air—that is not a reference to this place, obviously—but I have received a number of complaints from residents in my constituency of Great Grimsby, particularly in the West Marsh ward. Frankly, their lives are being blighted, on an irregular basis, by repeated unfortunate smells coming from the Pyewipe sewage treatment plant a few hundred yards from their homes.

I want to talk about some of the issues that my constituents have raised with me, and some of the general problems relating to standards and enforcement in the water treatment industry, which I am sure affect Members from across the House, particularly if they have water treatment works in their constituencies.

None of us would want to experience the smell originating from sewage treatment plants, even for a short period. I was knocking on doors in the area only about two or three weeks ago, and the smell was overpowering. People did not want to open their doors, not because I was knocking on them—it is completely the opposite when I knock on their doors—but because of the smell. People are completely fed up with it. It was so noticeable and present that I thought I had perhaps stepped in something unpleasant, but that was not the case. Perhaps, I thought, it might be because of the increasingly warm weather, and it might be coming from the river that runs alongside the area—a very pretty river, now that the Environment Agency has cleared up that space—but it was not coming from there either. The only place it could have been coming from was the water treatment works.

Council environmental health officers are obliged to investigate complaints of nuisance smells and take action if they adjudge them to be a statutory nuisance. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in reports of odours from Anglian Water-managed Pyewipe sewage treatment centre. Records that Anglian has shared with me show that there were no reports of odour between 2014 and 2017, which I find remarkable; fewer than 10 reports in 2017; fewer than 15 in 2018; and fewer than five in 2019. Given that we are only coming towards the end of April, that is quite a significant number. That leads me to question whether the reporting mechanism for local residents is well known. I suspect that one of the reasons why there were no complaints between 2014 and 2017 is that people were not aware of how they could make complaints.

Nuisance smells affect residents' ability to open their windows on hot days, enjoy their gardens and walk along the River Haven. They make them feel uncomfortable about inviting friends or family to visit their homes. Ultimately, they make our streets and communities far less open and enjoyable, as people choose to stay inside to avoid the odour, try to mask it with air fresheners or avoid the area altogether and go elsewhere. It is not right that my constituents are forced to put up with putrid

odours in their homes, which can have a negative effect on their lives. We should take that seriously. I remember talking to two constituents, one of whom had been undergoing some form of cancer treatment. They wanted to make sure their home was properly ventilated, but it became impossible to open their windows, and they were incredibly frustrated about that.

Water companies and environmental health departments must make it a key aim to ensure that water plants do not create nuisance smells, and that any reports of a smell emanating from one of their plants is dealt with in a serious and timely manner. Unfortunately, the experience of one of my constituents suggests that that is far from the reality for those suffering from nuisance smells in our area.

After corresponding with representatives of Anglian Water and visiting the site, my constituent sent a spreadsheet to Anglian Water in July 2018 that recorded all the times he had experienced a bad smell. Anglian's figures say that there were fewer than 15 odour reports in 2018, but I am fairly sure my constituent had more than 15 entries on his spreadsheet. I am not sure how that recording is done, but I will take it up with Anglian Water.

My constituent sent Anglian the spreadsheet in July 2018, having done what it requested him to do, but he attended one of my surgeries in January to seek my help in getting a reply because he had received absolutely nothing from the company—certainly nothing looking like any kind of solution. That is why he found himself visiting his MP to try to resolve the situation. People come to see their MPs as a last resort when they have been unable to get any kind of resolution through the normal channels. For an issue like this, the normal channels should be easily accessible, not surrounded by a kind of wall of bureaucracy that makes it impossible for individuals to get answers to simple, straightforward and genuine questions.

After my office chased Anglian Water for nearly a month, it finally replied to my constituent's concerns last month—eight months after his original complaint. That is wholly unacceptable.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Depending on the wind direction, the issue could also affect my constituency. She referred to West Marsh ward but, as she will acknowledge, if the wind is blowing in the right direction, Freshney ward or—over the border in my constituency—Wolds ward could equally be affected.

This has been a very long-running issue. In the years I spent on Grimsby Council and North East Lincolnshire Council, it was almost an annual event. I sympathise with the hon. Lady's constituents, and I fully support all actions that she is taking. I urge the Minister to lean on the responsible authorities.

Melanie Onn: I thank my constituency neighbour for raising that issue. He was a member of the local authority in its various guises for a number of years, so has vast experience of this issue. If it has been going on for this long, why has it not yet been resolved? The responses that Anglian Water sent recently to councillor colleagues responsible for the ward, Gemma Sheridan and Karl Wilson, have been dismissive to say the least, which is incredibly disappointing. This issue clearly comes up time and again. Why cannot Anglian get a grip and sort it out, to make the lives of people in the vicinity of its treatment works much more pleasant?

The reply that Anglian Water finally sent to my constituent said that, although the Pyewipe centre does produce odours, there are a lot of industrial sites around the area, and that he should report problems to the council's environmental health team as they occur. To my mind, that is passing the buck. It is a significant and particular odour. It is not one of general industry, of the very well-known fish processing industry or of farming. However, when my office contacted North East Lincolnshire council's environmental health department—as Anglian Water advised my constituent to do—we were told that an agreement had been made with Anglian Water that the company would be the first point of contact for odour-related complaints and that constituents should get in touch with it.

That means that my constituent was told by Anglian Water, the responsible body, to go to the local authority, which said, "No, no, no! We already have an agreement with Anglian Water. That's where the complaint should be issued." None of that excuses an eight-month delay when somebody lodges a formal complaint with an organisation, whether Anglian Water or a local authority. Frankly, residents do not care; they just want their concerns responded to.

That is far from being an isolated incident. Some streets of West Marsh are particularly negatively affected by the smells from the site. It has taken tireless work by local councillors Gemma Sheridan and Karl Wilson to chase and follow up residents' concerns about the nuisance and get some kind of response from Anglian Water. After those concerns were raised, Anglian invited the councillors over. On that day, miraculously, there was no smell, no issue and no problem. If that can be done for the councillors' visit, it can be done the rest of the time.

It is not good enough for my constituents to be passed from pillar to post when they try to report a problem that has a real effect on their lives and on their enjoyment of their communities. I understand the economic benefits for both parties of a first-instance reporting agreement between the local authority and Anglian Water, but that cannot come at the expense of constituents, who pay the cost of poor responsiveness and a lack of accountability and responsibility for sorting out the nuisance odour to which they are subjected.

In response, Anglian Water and North East Lincolnshire's environmental health team have agreed to meet me at the start of next month to try and sort out some of the problems in the system—I am very grateful and thank them for that. The experience of my constituent, however, as well as the fact that my office and local councillors have had to get involved so that the council's environmental health team and Anglian Water discuss the problem together, speaks to some fundamental problems with the governance of nuisance smells from sewage treatment centres and how that is allowed to function across country.

Although some level of casual, voluntary or first-response enforcement may be used efficiently within environmental protection enforcement against nuisance, it is no substitute for creating an accountable and fair system. Any system of that type needs checks and balances from the regulator to ensure that the companies operating them carry out the work up to a required standard and behave in a responsible manner. Clearly, that has not happened in the case of Pyewipe sewage treatment centre. The company

[*Melanie Onn*]

should not take eight months to respond to a detailed complaint about odour nuisance, and nor should the council or Anglian Water simply pass the buck rather than work together to solve the problem.

What can the Government do to help take action against such companies, which have a responsibility to local communities? Perhaps the Government will consider issuing guidance to local councils that use private-public voluntary partnerships in the environmental sector about how they can effectively ensure that the agreements that they make with companies to comply by environmental standards are actually met. Will the Minister also examine how much such schemes can be divorced from the accountability of official local and national bodies, without having a negative impact on the communities that pay the cost for mismanagement?

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) raised the issue of strong winds. That is exactly the response that Anglian Water gave to one of the councillors when the issue was raised three weeks ago. It blamed the wind and the direction of the wind, rather than getting to the heart of the matter and using the technology that I know is out there to solve some of those problems.

The situation is not the fault of the local council or environmental teams. When we talk about environmental enforcement, we cannot ignore the impact of the massive budget cuts experienced by councils across the country since 2010. I recognise that when councils have to choose between statutory duties such as adult social care, anti-social behaviour, homelessness, children's social care and libraries, that comes at the expense of non-statutory functions, such as enforcement or, in this case, an environmental health team that is stretched across numerous responsibilities. That team makes sure that the air that we breathe is safe; deals with fly-tipping complaints and safety and hygiene standards in the food sector; and ensures that home and businesses do not contain major faults and hazards. That is a lot of responsibility and many duties for a small team of people.

Although there are a number of solutions, which I will raise with Anglian Water and the enforcement team when I meet them next week, can we look at what actually counts as a statutory nuisance? I understand that there has to be a certain frequency and level for something to be considered a nuisance, but a lower threshold might encourage companies to take their responsibilities more seriously. Can something be done to ensure that water companies are required to use the most up-to-date technology available to deal with these problems or, if they are going to blame the direction of the wind, to provide a barrier to prevent that smell spreading across a wider area?

Anglian Water's response to me, which gave the figures for the complaints that the company had received, said:

"We recognise that these figures demonstrate there has been a recent increase in odour reported to Anglian Water at this time, with a particular spike during summer 2018. We are aware that the long, hot dry spell may have contributed to a temporary increase in odour on the site."

I do not know whether others enjoyed the Easter weekend, but it was the hottest on record, and last year's was the previous hottest Easter on record—there seems to be a pattern. A number of the people currently in Parliament Square would tell us time and again that we are likely to

experience a pattern of increasingly lengthy dry spells. The whole of London has been brought to a standstill over the last two weeks by climate change protestors, which tells us that there is a steady increase in temperature. That means that there will be increasingly lengthy and hot dry spells. If that is the case, the problem will only get worse, and local residents will continue to suffer if Anglian Water does not take action.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes has dealt with or recognised the problem for the last 15 or 20 years—

Martin Vickers: Even more than that!

Melanie Onn: Forty or 50? If so, the issue is longstanding and needs to be resolved before the weather plays an increasing role and the problem becomes uncontrollable. I saw in my research ahead of the debate that if the problem remains unresolved, it will limit how people live their lives, down to not being able to open their windows, have visitors or rent out properties. If residents cannot sell their homes because the area becomes undesirable, that presumably leaves them in a position to seek some form of legal action or compensatory claim. That would be the worst of all worlds: I do not think that anybody wants that outcome.

I ask the Minister to point me in the right direction and suggest some pointers ahead of my meeting with Anglian Water and the local authority, for the sake of the West Marsh residents on whose lives the issue has a significant impact and to solve the problem once and for all.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 1.30 pm. We go from the fragrant hon. Lady to the sweet-smelling Minister.

1.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, in particular with comments such as that, which do not happen often—thank you very much. I am sure that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) also feels the benefit of your kind remarks.

I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She is a formidable spokesperson for her constituency and works hard in the main Chamber and here in Westminster Hall. It is good that she was able to secure this debate on the odour nuisance from waste water treatment works on behalf of the many constituents whom she represents. It is also good to hear the authoritative voice of my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) who has, dare I say it, decades of experience. He does not look old enough for that, but he smells sweetly enough to represent those views.

I sympathise greatly with the residents of West Marsh. The issue is clearly unpleasant and, as the hon. Lady described, distressing. It significantly affects their quality of life, and I particularly appreciate the concerns expressed about the potential for the problem to become worse in the summer when residents need to be able to ventilate their homes. Both Members highlighted concern about the summer, so it is important that we get to grips with the problem as quickly as possible.

Statutory nuisance legislation provides the mechanism for communities to raise concerns of this nature with their local authority, requiring it to investigate and, where necessary, to take measures to resolve the issue.

Section 79 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 places a duty on local authorities to inspect their areas from time to time to detect statutory nuisances, and to investigate complaints made by local residents about issues that could be a statutory nuisance. Smells from industry, trade or business premises, which include waste water treatment works, are among the statutory nuisances listed under the Act.

To be a statutory nuisance, an issue must either unreasonably and substantially interfere with the use or enjoyment of a home or other premises, or injure or be likely to injure health. It is not essential for local authorities or environmental health practitioners to witness the nuisance themselves—that point was made by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby because, unfortunately, when they came to visit with the councillors, there was no smell—but they need to be satisfied that the statutory nuisance exists or is likely to occur or recur, as seems to be the case with the issue raised by the hon. Lady.

Any decision will take into account a number of factors, including the reasonableness of the activity, the time of day of the occurrence, and its duration and frequency. Local authorities and environmental health practitioners need to decide whether they have enough evidence to justify a view that statutory nuisance exists before they take enforcement action. It sounds as if many of the hon. Lady's constituents are taking the right steps, and we must ensure that the information is being provided not just to the local authority but to Anglian Water—we will come on to that.

The decision as to whether a particular issue constitutes a statutory nuisance is normally made by the local environmental health practitioner on a case-by-case basis. Section 80 of the Act imposes a duty on local authorities to serve an abatement notice where they are satisfied that a nuisance exists, or is likely to occur or recur in that area. The notice may require whoever is responsible to stop the activity, or to limit it to certain times to avoid causing a nuisance, and may include specific actions to reduce the problem.

It is an offence not to comply with an abatement notice without reasonable excuse. Someone who does not comply with an abatement notice can be prosecuted and, on conviction, in the case of industrial, trade and business premises, fined an unlimited amount. If local residents experience an odour problem that they believe might constitute a statutory nuisance, I urge them to contact their local authority without delay, describing the nature of the odour and providing any other details that might be helpful.

If it should prove to be the case that the odour nuisance that is the focus of our attention now originates from the waste water treatment works, the hon. Lady should be assured that we have strong rules in place not only to protect and improve water quality in England through proper collection, treatment and discharge of waste water, but to prevent unacceptable odour. Certain activities at waste water treatment works are regulated via appropriate environmental permits, depending on the nature of their operations. Conditions attached to the permits include those regarding odour. In 2018, the Environment Agency received 21,600 reports of odour pollution—I am pleased to report that not all of them

were in the constituency of the hon. Lady—which were investigated by the agency where it regulated the activity. The remaining cases were investigated by the relevant local authority.

I understand that a significant number of industrial premises in the West Marsh area have the potential to cause odour, including waste-management and fish-processing facilities, and it may therefore not be straightforward to establish the odour origination point, although the hon. Member for Great Grimsby seems to have a pretty good idea of that—she has been forthright in her view. The local authority, in this case North East Lincolnshire Council, is responsible for identifying the sources of the odour that is causing a nuisance in the local area, and for issuing an abatement notice where it concludes that a nuisance is occurring. The Environment Agency has been working with North East Lincolnshire Council and Anglian Water to support improved odour monitoring, including a joint site visit and training for the council staff. The agency has also worked to facilitate effective local communications between the two parties.

The hon. Lady made an important point about reporting mechanisms. Local residents with ongoing concerns about odours associated with the treatment works at Pyewipe operated by Anglian Water Services should contact the main number, 0345 714 5145, in the first instance. If necessary, they may then contact North East Lincolnshire Council to follow up. I trust that Anglian Water is listening to and following the debate. Eight-month delays are completely unacceptable in any public body. It is absolutely clear that any approaches to a complaint and follow-up action need to be transparent and easy to use. I hope, if nothing else comes out of the debate, that it will become clear where the first point of contact should be—Anglian Water.

While being odour-free in all circumstances may not be possible, nevertheless there are many options for abating odour nuisance. I therefore encourage the hon. Member for Great Grimsby to continue to work with the local authority and Anglian Water to establish the exact source of the odour and to ensure that action is taken to mitigate it. I understand that Anglian Water is happy to convene a meeting with the hon. Lady, the local authority and the Environment Agency to discuss the concerns that have been expressed and to identify a way forward. I am pleased to hear that that meeting has been arranged for 1 May. I also gather that there is a desire on all sides proactively to improve communications and to resolve the situation as far as possible in advance of the summer months. The timing is good.

It is not the role of Government to intervene in local nuisance cases of this kind, but I assure the hon. Lady that the local authority has all the powers necessary to tackle the problem. I hope that this debate and my words on behalf of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will assist her in her efforts to resolve the issue and to address the concerns of her constituents, whom she seeks to serve well with all her dedication.

Question put and agreed to.

1.28 pm

Sitting suspended.

Proportional Representation: House of Commons

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Change UK): I beg to move,

That this House has considered proportional representation in the House of Commons.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I begin by thanking the House of Commons digital engagement service for its work in preparation for this debate. It engages with voters on Facebook to great effect. Between 15 and 23 April, its Facebook post on proportional representation was seen by 29,448 accounts and had 7,936 clicks and 1,803 engagements. Of those engagements, 496 were Facebook users who wanted to comment on the issue, clearly demonstrating that there is a lot of interest—such is the interest that the debate is being streamed on the House of Commons Facebook page. I was impressed by the quality of insights made on the post and humbled by the number of them, and I thank all those who took the time to share their thoughts on proportional representation on Facebook.

In trying to do justice to the online discussion I can do no better than to begin by admitting that for many years I remained stubbornly resistant to the arguments for proportional representation, but no longer. Recent events have forced me to rethink my stance. In other words, I am happy to admit that I was wrong to defend first past the post for so long. My epiphany came in the wake of the 2017 election, when it became painfully obvious that the current electoral system is no longer fit for purpose. That was the third general election in a row in which our voting system failed to secure the strong, stable government that we all see as its key strength. It gave the Tories just under 50% of the seats available, with 42% of the vote. According to the Electoral Reform Society, 22 million voters had no impact on the result because they remained loyal to their tribe, despite knowing there was no chance whatsoever of securing victory for their candidates.

Many online respondents felt despondent and angry that living in a safe seat could mean that their vote counted for nothing. One respondent, Jamie, said:

“No one could possibly condone a system that essentially makes hundreds of thousands of voters redundant, and even worse reinforces the feeling of apathy that puts many people off from participating in the political process in the first place.”

On the other hand, 6.5 million voters decided to vote tactically in order to empower their choices, to give themselves a small but nevertheless important opportunity to help shape the outcome of the election. The situation was summarised beautifully by one of the contributors to the Facebook page, Adrienne, who said:

“I would like a proportional representation system so that I could vote for the party whose policies I agree with. At the moment my choice is either to vote tactically for a party I don't want but whose policies I object to less, or to 'waste' my vote on the party I like—I live in a safe seat and can't ever see my preferred party being successful. I think this question is more pertinent than ever following the political mess that has been Brexit. I have lost all faith that my voice will be heard in the current system.”

At this point, many hon. Members will be thinking, “Yes, we've always argued that the current voting system is unfair.” Quite fairly, they would accuse me of having remained willingly blind to its iniquities. I have believed throughout my adult life that first past the post is justifiable because it promises strong government and a democratic basis for the implementation of the winning party's manifesto. However, as I conceded, the key defence of first past the post has crumbled and is no longer credible, leading to my road-to-Damascus moment.

Three elections in a row failed to deliver strong government. Why? What is going on? Let us begin with the deep and ongoing crisis afflicting the two biggest political parties. Brexit is seen by many as the cause, but I would contend that it is a symptom of a newly emboldened populist discourse that has fractured our politics. As a consequence, both the Tory party and the Labour party are struggling with widening ideological divides that threaten to become an existential threat. That development is important because in a two-party system, voters need to be sure that the party they support is capable of delivering the realistic, pragmatic politics vital to the effective governing of the country.

There is a strong sense that both major parties are failing to maintain an approach to policy making based on consensus within each party and with the electorate, because the broad churches they represent are evaporating in the face of a blistering assault from the far reaches of the right and the left. We face a serious and possibly terminal decline in the ability of the two major parties to process political options, sift them and present them as a meaningful choice at an election. It is no wonder that long-term trends in voting behaviour indicate that the case for reform of the voting system is getting stronger, not weaker.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): The hon. Lady makes some powerful points, but the only time that the British National party has ever been elected was through the d'Hondt system of proportional representation in the last European elections.

Angela Smith: I do not intend to go through the different PR models available, because I am establishing the principle, but I believe there are models of PR that prevent the accession of small extremist parties to a parliamentary system. Germany has such a system.

The recent British Social Attitudes survey found that only 8% of voters identify strongly with a political party. Polls regularly report not only diminishing support for the two parties, but a sense that “none of the above” is an increasingly attractive choice for British voters. That is best expressed by a gradually reducing turnout. In 1950, 84% of voters cast their preferences at the ballot box. In the 2017 election, turnout was 68%. There is other firm evidence that voters are losing confidence in our representative democracy. The report by the Institute for Public Policy Research on the 2015 election established that less than half of 18 to 24-year-olds voted, compared with nearly 80% of those aged 65 and over. That is a worrying trend.

The past 30 years have seen the emergence of a dramatic divide in how people vote, especially as far as the age demographic is concerned. The evidence is clear: voters increasingly demonstrate that they no longer trust the two main parties to manage the democratic process. Both Labour and the Tories have traditionally held a

huge responsibility under first past the post. In an electoral process that offers only limited opportunities to change the political colour of a constituency, we have relied on the two major parties to provide candidates who are capable of taking on the coveted role of Member of Parliament, and to provide a well-thought-through programme for government that is realistic and promises to meet the needs of the country. Increasingly there is a feeling that both parties are failing to take those responsibilities seriously, to the extent that voters are no longer content to be managed by political parties. They increasingly seek plurality, so that they can sift for themselves the range of policy choices available in any given election. Voters no longer want to be patronised by the democratic process; they want to be empowered by it.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I commend the hon. Lady on her speech and on the candour and force with which she makes her points. What she says is true not just of national government but of local government. May I offer her the example of local government in Scotland where, since 2007, councils have been elected under the single transferable vote? We have seen the end of single-party monoliths across Scotland, and that has been absolutely rejuvenating for local democracy in Scotland.

Angela Smith: I completely accept the right hon. Gentleman's point. I restricted this debate to Westminster, but that does not mean that I believe these principles do not apply to local government—they do.

Our 19th-century voting system is unfit for the 21st century. As one respondent wrote on the Facebook page accompanying this debate, the system acts as a straitjacket, denying voters the multiplicity of choices they crave. Another respondent, Benny, commented that PR

“would make sure that every vote counts, enabling all voters to feel more involved in the democratic process.”

If we are serious about changing our politics, we must start with how we elect our Parliament. We need reform to ensure fairness and integrity in the electoral process, and that means acknowledging the case made by events in the past few years for a more pluralistic system that gives back control to voters.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Will she tell us which system she favours? There are a number of systems we could use, but it would be very interesting to know which appeals to her.

Angela Smith: What I will say is that I do not favour a system that removes the constituency link. We must have a system that keeps the constituency link in place. One of the reasons the alternative vote referendum failed is that AV is not proper PR. We need proper PR, but we need the constituency link.

If we win approval in Parliament for implementing a new PR system, we should begin the process of establishing a proportional system by holding deliberative discussions—citizens' assemblies—across the country to develop the right option for our country. That is the way we should do this. I am not going to say which system I want to see. That is not for me to decide. The country has to decide which system suits us best. That is the best way of approaching the implementation of a change in the voting system.

As I said, we need a more pluralistic system that gives back control to voters. That is what the democratic process is about. The days of patronising voters and managing their choices for them are over, and we need to recognise that. No longer can excuses be made to avoid change. Indeed, every new legislature created by this Parliament uses some form of PR. Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the London Assembly all use proportional systems. STV, Mr Evans, is even used to elect the Deputy Speakers of this House.

I am convinced that change is coming. It is overdue. I apologise for my tardiness in acknowledging the strength of the argument for PR, but better late than never. Let's get on with it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. Members can see how many people are standing. The wind-ups will start at half-past 5, so please show enormous constraint—just make your points and then allow others to get in. I call Vicky Ford.

4.44 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am one of the few parliamentarians to have been elected under both the first-past-the-post system, as a Member of this Parliament, and a proportional representation system—I was elected twice to the European Parliament.

Some people say proportional representation will lead to a more consensual approach to decision making. I have seen that consensus sometimes does occur more in the European Parliament than people occasionally perceive to be the case here, but in my experience from the past couple of years, there are many areas of Westminster in which decision making happens along consensus lines; I think especially of the work we do in Select Committees and on all-party parliamentary groups. On the other hand, I have seen fundamental flaws in the proportional representation system, and we should be very careful when thinking about adopting changes to our system.

Let me take Members back 10 years to 2009, when European elections were held at the height of the expenses scandal. The turnout was very low, which meant people could get elected with only a very small number of voters turning up to support them. Two members of the British National party were elected, with fewer than 3% of the voters supporting them. At the time, that party would not allow someone to join as a member unless their face was white. Those people were given seats in the European Parliament. They were given credibility and respectability.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Does the hon. Lady not accept that part of the problem with that election was the closed-list d'Hondt system, which discriminates? In certain regions it allows extremist parties to get through, but in other regions it requires parties to reach a much higher figure. Would it not be better to move to a national form of proportional representation for European elections, such as the one that the French use?

Vicky Ford: We could use the German system—a national system with a national list, which means that a candidate needs 0.7% of the vote to get a seat. My point is that, especially as turnout is low, a very small number

[Vicky Ford]

of votes can give people with quite extreme views credibility, funding and access to support, so we should be very wary.

In my experience, proportional representation also really changes a Member's relationship with their voters. Because there are multiple Members for each seat, there have to be wider constituencies, meaning that Members do not have the same close relationship with their voters. [Interruption.] I will not give way, I am afraid, because lots of people want to speak. Under proportional representation, Members do not have the same intimate relationship with their voters, in which the voters know, "That is my MP; I can hold that person responsible," and the Member knows they are responsible to those people. Proportional representation breaks the link between the voter and the elected representative. I would be very wary of doing that to our democracy.

Democracy, as Winston Churchill said, is the worst form of government, apart from all the rest. Trust in our politics is very low, but I do not believe that changing our electoral system is a miracle cure or a silver bullet that will solve that problem.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I am extremely grateful for the hon. Lady's brevity.

4.48 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. As I represent a Scottish constituency, I work alongside Members of the Scottish Parliament who were elected under both constituency-based and regional-based systems, as well as local councillors who were voted in under the STV system, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned. We come from a culture where there is reasonably fair cohabitation of proportional representation and majoritarian systems.

I am fairly open-minded about the idea of different electoral systems. The key thing is for us to agree that there needs to be a thorough constitutional convention. It is high time that every aspect of the entire structure of Westminster's governance was reviewed. I am sure we have a litany of ideas about reform of the structure—not just the electoral system, but the second Chamber and the way Westminster interfaces—and that is certainly what the Labour party advocates.

There are certainly problems with the way the Scottish Parliament's structure works. Combining regional lists and constituencies creates an imbalance between the different types of MSPs, which often leads to problems. When we talk about PR, we have to take cognisance of the fact that there are different methods of PR. The system can also lead to distortions. Even in the last Westminster election in 2017, Labour gained 27% of the vote in Scotland but only 11% of seats. That is a clear imbalance. The Scottish National party achieved, I think, 36% of the vote and won 59% of the seats. Those clear imbalances could be corrected within regions under a more proportional system.

I supported the alternative vote compromise, introduced as a condition of the coalition Government agreement. That would have maintained the benefits of the constituency link, which have been mentioned, while allowing at least

a majority to be established in support of electing a Member of Parliament. That seemed a reasonably sensible staging post towards a further review, but it was a great disappointment that that was rejected in a referendum.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I do not know whether my hon. Friend did A-level politics as I did, but we were always taught that the current system delivers stable and clear results. However, two out of the last three general elections have shown that it does not. The current Government are the least satisfactory of all, with £1 billion given to the Democratic Unionist party; pulled votes; meaningful votes that were anything but; and indicative votes that were far from that. Does he not agree that all that points to first past the post being past it? The old saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," does not hold. It is broken and it should be fixed.

Mr Sweeney: I am sympathetic to that point. Indeed, who voted for first past the post? Was a referendum ever held on that? Why is it assumed that the burden of proof must lie with those who oppose the existing system? We need a thorough root-and-branch review of the entire structure of our politics as part of a constitutional convention and national conversation. Hopefully we can achieve some consensus among the parties about what needs to change. That could be delivered through a manifesto and a general election.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend not agree that we are in the midst of a constitutional crisis, and that a national debate, as he suggests, with a constitutional convention and citizens' assembly, might help our broader understanding of how the country operates, and ensure greater democratic participation? The problems around low turnout were highlighted by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford); surely changing the system, following a national debate, would raise turnout.

Mr Sweeney: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. This is the issue with referendums: they present simplistic answers to very complex questions, and binary referendums in particular often lead to contentious and unfortunately hostile arguments being made. A spirit of conflict rather than consensus envelops such contests. We must cut across those points and develop a much more consensual method.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In Ireland, the referendums on equal marriage and abortion rights, which were preceded by a constitutional convention and citizens' assemblies, are widely thought to have delivered such decisive results because of the deliberative democracy that took place in advance. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that on this issue, a citizens' assembly or constitutional convention preceding a final decision would be the best way forward?

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for that important point. It is critical that that spirit underpins any test in a plebiscite. Another example is, of course, the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, with the Scottish constitutional convention. She may say that the Scottish National party was not always supportive of that process, but in the end we arrived at consensus and an overwhelming result in the 1997 referendum, and we delivered a Scottish Parliament in 1999. It is a tried and tested model. That is in stark contrast to the rather more contentious referendum in Scotland in 2014 and across the UK in 2016.

We must think carefully about how referendums are framed, how they are delivered and how they are presented to the people for discussion. If they are unnecessarily contentious, we see no resolution and no popular consent; if we get a very narrow result, a large cohort of the population feels that it has been cheated.

I am open-minded about what we could arrive at in electoral system reform. The current system is clearly not fit for purpose, but I am not hung up on any one model. For example, there are problems with the Scottish Parliament system, which could be reformed and further enhanced. The combination of the list and the constituency link is not entirely coherent, and after 20 years of devolution, that question ought to be considered. The fundamental thing we must all agree on is an urgent need for a constitutional convention across the UK, to provide a root-and-branch review of our entire political system. Hopefully, through that, we can arrive at a system that is fit for this century.

4.54 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I rise to speak in support of the motion. Undoubtedly, this country's current voting arrangements do not adequately reflect the diversity of opinion that there now is among the electorate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) for raising this issue for debate.

There are many different forms of proportional representation, some of which have been touched on briefly. We had a referendum on AV, in which AV was universally defeated—rightly so, because under that system the candidate who comes fourth could become the Member of Parliament if they were the least disliked. That may be an argument in favour of AV, but those who believe in a constituency link find it difficult to argue that the person who came third or fourth should eventually go on to become a Member of Parliament. We also have single transferable vote, and then we have proportional representation.

We have talked a little about the merits of first past the post. It was traditionally argued that that system tends to deliver strong government—arguably, that is not the case at the moment. It maintains a constituency link, but some forms of proportional representation also do that. It also—this is the strongest argument in its favour—tends to be a bulwark against the entryism of extremist minority parties. In the 2015 election, even though the UK Independence party received 13% or 14% of the vote, it gained only one seat, which to my mind shows at least some benefit, in that first past the post keeps some of those minority parties out.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Is not one of the issues that because UKIP got something like 4 million votes but did not get many Members elected to this House, tensions boiled up? We saw that, with a Member of Parliament having been murdered before the EU referendum. Is not the fact that we do not look at having a fair, proportional representation system part of the issue?

Dr Poulter: I do not entirely disagree. Certainly that 13% or 14% of the electorate may have felt disenfranchised by the result to some extent, but during that election I think we all recognised the extremist nature of some of the views held by that party and some of its candidates.

The hon. Gentleman is correct on the broader issue. We now have a much more fractured politics than we did half a century ago, when there was a stronger argument for first past the post, and many groups do not feel represented in their constituencies. For example, I received more than 60% of the vote in my constituency at the last election, but consistently about 15% to 20% of that electorate have voted for the Labour party. Indeed, in Suffolk as a whole in 2010 and 2015, 25% of the electorate voted for Labour and yet seven Conservative MPs were returned. That is not representative of the general feelings of Suffolk residents.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Does he recognise that proportional representation is about more than electoral outcomes and that, actually, proportional systems change political culture in a way that delivers more effective social outcomes? Societies with PR are more likely to have lower income inequality, better developed welfare systems, higher social expenditure, better distribution of public goods and better environmental controls. It is a much wider issue.

Dr Poulter: The hon. Gentleman is right. Broadly, there is a strong case and good evidence that in countries with proportional representation, or a more proportional system, there tends to be more consensus government, which tends to recognise certain common goods. Today, there is an urgent question in the main Chamber on climate change. In many other countries in Europe, climate change's importance in the legislative agenda is reinforced by that sort of consensus politics.

For example, the work done by the former leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), when he was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change in the latter part of the last decade, was broadly supported across the House, but if there had been a sudden lurch to a Government who perhaps did not believe in climate change, a lot of that work could have been undone under the British system. That is much harder to do under a proportional system, under which there has to be much more work through consensus between political parties. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make that point about the sort of politics that many of us here would like to see.

I want to allow other hon. Members to speak, so I will be very quick. In my view, if we are to have a PR system that is effective, it has to maintain the constituency link. It also has to ensure that we deal with the issue of having a potential threshold, even under PR, for election, be it 5% of the electorate in a particular area or whatever. The best way of doing that, I believe, is by doing something broadly along the lines of what we have currently for the European elections—perhaps not on the basis of a large-scale region, but on a county basis or a city-regional basis. That would allow people in, for example, London, where boroughs identify together, to elect from those boroughs a proportional number of MPs from different parties, according to how those electors voted.

That strikes me, in comparison with our current political settlement, as a much fairer way of electing people. It certainly would have given a voice in 2010 and 2015 to the 25% of constituents in Suffolk who voted for the Labour party but did not have any MP to

[*Dr Poulter*]

represent them. I hope that, going forward, it would also give rise to the more consensus-based politics on the big issues of the day, such as climate change, and other forms of policy making that all of us here, I hope, believe in.

5.1 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I start from the point of view that our electoral system is not one that I could, hand on heart, say is democratic perfection. It is clear that our winner-takes-all format means that millions of people feel that their vote does not count, and of course there is the unquantifiable number of people who vote for something other than their first choice because they see the vote in their area as a choice between the lesser of two evils, rather than as a positive vote for the party that they want to support. Proclaiming that I have won an election because I am the lesser of two evils has not yet made it into any of my acceptance speeches, but I have been called a lot worse, particularly recently.

As politics in this country is in crisis, it is not surprising that the news that a comedian has won the Ukrainian elections has been met by comments in this country that we had beaten them to it. Such is the contempt that people feel for us all now that it would not surprise me to see, if we had an election soon, more than a few of us being replaced by unlikely candidates: having no previous political experience is definitely a selling point right now. What I am talking about is not just a new name for old faces, but a new type of politician, an anti-politics politician, the likes of whom we have seen springing up all over the world in recent years.

It is evident at every election that millions of votes end up counting for nothing and some votes, depending on where they are, can literally be worth their weight in gold, so I want reform of the current system. However, I am sceptical about constitutional changes coming forward from the existing set of politicians, because there is almost always going to be some element of political calculation with such proposals.

Let us take the 2011 AV referendum. I voted in that referendum to change the system, but I was under no illusions: the only reason why it came forward was that it was politically expedient for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats at the time to hold a referendum to keep the coalition agreement going. I appreciate that AV is not the purest form of PR and that it is possible that in landslide years it can exaggerate the winning party's dominance even more, but at least in that set-up everyone should be able to vote for their preferred choice, at least in the first instance.

However, the real attraction of AV for me is the retention of the constituency link. I believe that the best element of our current system is that each Member has to answer to his or her constituents at every election and that there is no hiding place for the decisions that they take. PR systems and lists remove that vital link and can lead to a lack of direct accountability between voters and those who represent them.

I wonder whether the 2016 referendum result would have been different if MEPs had individual constituencies to represent. Obviously, the factors behind that vote

were many, and it would probably be stretching things too far to say that the outcome would have been different, but it is clear that one reason why leave won was that people did not think that the European Parliament was representing their interests. The lack of an identifiable local representative was part of that.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is making a really important point about the constituency link. That is a critical thing that ought to be protected. Since the Scottish Parliament was created, the number of constituencies in Scotland represented from Westminster has been reduced, so the size of the constituencies has increased. My constituency takes in two Scottish Parliament constituencies, so there are two MSPs. Having to cover the same ground as the MSPs often means that it is very difficult to maintain the same degree of link with the geography. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a flaw in the system that needs to be looked at if we are proposing to move to a more proportional system?

Justin Madders: Yes, I do agree. Of course, one weakness in the Government's proposals to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600 is that that would create very large constituencies that in some cases were unmanageable and did not have geographical communities of interests.

On the subject of MEPs, although we have some excellent hard-working Labour MEPs in the north-west, the track record of people sent by this country to represent us in the European Parliament is not a great advert for PR. Of the 73 MEPs elected in 2014, 25 are no longer in the party that they were in when first elected.

We have had a few defections in this place, but on nothing like the scale that we have seen in Europe. More than one third of all the UK MEPs no longer represent the party that they were elected to represent. Let us be clear: if one third of Members in this place swapped parties, that could easily lead to a change of Government. Any system that allows so many politicians to denude the voters of their voice needs to be seriously challenged. Of course, politicians can change party under first past the post—we have heard today from some Members who have done that—but at least they have to face their constituents when they do it. Under PR, those people who ride under one banner of convenience can easily find themselves on the list for their new party at the next election with no apparent consequences for their actions. That does not sound like a democratic system to me.

Whatever system we have, we also need to look at whether this place is truly representative of the people whom we wish to represent. According to the Sutton Trust, 29% of MPs were privately educated, compared with just 7% of the general population. That is an improvement on the 32% from the 2015 election, but there is still a long way to go.

In conclusion, we need a massive overhaul in how politics is conducted in this country. How our economy and society works has massively changed in the last decade. Any item that we desire can be ordered from the comfort of our own home and be on our doorstep the next day, but our political system, both in the way elections are held and in the way Parliament operates, is stuck in a time warp.

One of the most commonly used arguments in favour of first past the post is that it enables there to be "stable" majority government. In recent times, that theory has

been tested to destruction. Every day that we spend here without making any progress on the big issues of the day is another day closer to a far more radical change to the way we do politics, which will come from outside, not from in here.

What will happen with all the excellent arguments that we are hearing in favour of different systems today? I will tell you, Mr Evans: nothing will happen. Nothing will change. Nothing is changing. Parliament seems incapable of changing anything, incapable of tackling the big issues that we face in this country. That is why we all need to wake up and fundamentally challenge the way our democracy works—not just how we vote but, more importantly, what we actually do once we are elected.

5.8 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I recognise that there is a need to look at our electoral system and to explore electoral system reform. Why do I believe that?

I first stood for election in 2009, in the midst of the expenses scandal. We cannot blame this system for the expenses scandal but, despite having never been in this place before, I knew what it was to face people who had completely lost trust in MPs and the system that elected them to this place. As a result, ever since I was elected, it has been important to me that we find ways to restore trust in politics. The problem is that that has not been very successful; since that time, we seem to have continued to erode trust in British politicians and the democratic system. We have a job to do and we need to look at whatever is necessary to restore trust in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with all our history and heritage and all that we stand for, for the future.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister and the Government that they would do well not to ignore this issue. I have tried to raise it a few times and, although I do not want to be unfair, it is kind of dismissed because there are more important things to be doing. However, we exist at a time in this place when huge chunks of our constituents have almost given up on us and what we stand for. It is really important for the United Kingdom that we do something about that. I urge the Government not to ignore the issue and to look at what can be achieved.

As has already been said, it will not be for the main political parties to come up with the answer; that will not restore trust either. I recommend that the Minister and the Government find a completely independent means of looking at what answers, options and opportunities there are, and to consider them when the time arises. As we are in the middle of Brexit, I suggest that that time is not now.

I agree that votes should matter. Since I have been elected, an organisation called Make Votes Matter has sent representatives—in fairness, not a huge number. As they have spoken to me, I have recognised that they do not feel represented or that their voices are being heard. In Cornwall in 2017, sadly, many of the smaller parties, which did reasonably well in 2015, felt that there was no purpose in even putting forward candidates, so they refrained from even standing. That meant that the three main political parties shared about 98% of all the votes that were there to be had. It was a shame to me that people across Cornwall, including my constituents, felt there was no point in engaging in the 2017 election.

People must have the opportunity to feel that they have a stake in their democracy, as well as a voice. Once we are elected as MPs, we must work to make sure that people have a voice. I never use the word “Conservative” in constituency work—not because I am ashamed of it, but because I know full well that I represent every single person. I work hard to get that message across to people who might think I would have no interest in what they care about or what affects their lives. I work hard to make sure that I am approachable and accessible, and I want to make sure that my constituents’ voices are heard.

I met representatives of Make Votes Matter to understand what an alternative voting system could and would look like. I agree that serious consideration should be given to electoral system reform. When I discuss the subject with people, I make it clear—and it has been made clear here this afternoon—that we must retain the local constituency link. We could jump from a situation where people have lost trust in their politicians for whatever reason, but at least they still can go and see them on a Friday or Saturday, to a point where they no longer have access.

We have referred to MEPs this afternoon. Since the Brexit referendum, very few MEPs have been anywhere near Cornwall; when they have been, some—although not all—have taken part in anti-Brexit meetings. At the moment, we have lost access to some of our MEPs, which is a real shame. It is important that if we move to another system we maintain that constituency link and the ability for people to come and speak to us, and effect change.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is making a thoughtful speech. Has he considered the single transferable vote system? He rightly says that the constituency link is important. We use that system to elect local councillors in Scotland. The link is maintained, but there is also greater proportionality.

On the problems that the hon. Gentleman identifies, would he accept that the two-party dominance of the first-past-the-post system is being stretched to breaking point, with broad churches forming that are beyond having meaning? Part of the problem that we are seeing in our politics is down to the voting system itself.

Derek Thomas: In Cornwall, the Conservatives polled about 49% in 2017 and the other two parties each had about half of the remainder, so I agree with the hon. Lady. There could have been a different way of representing Cornwall, although I probably would not have been elected if that had been the case.

If there were a general election in a few weeks’ time, it would be interesting for us on both sides of the House to find out what we could agree on in a manifesto. When people say to me, “Do you think there will be a general election?” I say, “I hope so, because at the moment I don’t know what the manifesto would even look like.” The hon. Lady is right; we need to clarify again what we stand for and give people a reason to believe. I agree with her and I welcome her intervention.

It is important to maintain the constituency link, and I will give an example of that. As a Back-Bench Member, I was encouraged early on by one of my colleagues in Cornwall to get as many Back-Bench debates as I could, mainly in this Chamber. I have done that. Every single debate that I have sought to secure has been

[Derek Thomas]

driven by a conversation with a constituent who has come to see me. It has been a privilege to meet someone 300 miles away and talk about an issue that matters to them, and then bring it to the Floor of this House.

I am talking about important issues: community pharmacy, which was raised by a pharmacist who told me about changes to funding that would affect rural areas and which became my first ever debate; the post office network, which is a big issue for rural communities; fuel poverty, which is a concern in my constituency; the environment, which as we know from the last couple of weeks is important to many people and about which I have recently secured a debate; horse and rider safety, which was raised with me early on because where I live people on horses take their lives in their hands when faced with cars coming around corners; and employment opportunities for people with disabilities. We need to maintain the opportunity for people to turn up and say, “Can you raise this on my behalf?” and for us to get on and do that.

Our system encourages conflict and aggression; people are shocked to see the adversarial nature of this place. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) that proportional representation or any type of electoral system reform will not be the silver bullet that some believe it would be. However, something must be done to secure a more constructive and productive, and less adversarial, Parliament. I would love that: as a Back-Bencher, I find that working with colleagues across the House, through Select Committees or all-party parliamentary groups, can be really constructive. The idea that we sit opposite each other, trying to pull the most curious faces that we can, seems peculiar to me.

As I have said, it is not for the main political parties to sort this out. I suggest to the Minister that the Government find an independent means to review our current system and see what opportunity exists to improve public trust and public engagement through electoral system reform. It is right that we look at this seriously, that we take voters seriously and that we listen to what they have to say. I believe there is a sea-change in Great Britain and a desire to find a different way of moving forward. The time is not now, but I imagine that in the near future we will be forced to look at doing things differently. It would be better for the Government and the main Opposition parties to be ahead of the curve.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): There are four people wishing to speak, so if they all stick to about three minutes, we will get everybody in.

5.17 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

I confess right away that I am not a recent convert to PR; there has been no damascene conversion for me. One of the reasons why I joined the Liberal Democrats when I did was that it seemed obvious to me that the current system has a fatal flaw. That was obvious to me from a young age, because my parents lived in a safe seat, but did not vote for the party that won every single time for as long as that party existed, until 2015. I learned at an early age that first past the post does not represent everybody.

I am not one of the Members in this House who has been elected by proportional representation, although there are many. My hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) was elected to the Scottish Parliament by proportional representation, as were many Government Members, yet this place remains the only national Parliament in the EU that uses first past the post. We often get caught up in talking about percentages, representation and types of PR, but if we look at first past the post, there is only one figure that really matters: 44% of the votes cast are meaningless. Those people are failed by a system that sets one party against another.

Living as I do in Scotland under a PR system at every level—except the Westminster level—I see the difference. I see the difference in a Scottish Parliament that has had, with one exception, minority Governments, and has been forced to find consensus and a way that suited the majority of the people represented in that Parliament. As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who is just leaving, we also have PR at council level in Scotland, and a direct link between the voters and their representatives.

Next time we find ourselves in deadlock in Parliament, where one side cannot win over the other—I am sure it will not be long in the current political climate—we should think how different it would be if we had a proportional representation system, in which we all had constituencies and constituents watching what we were doing, but also had a way of being forced to find consensus, and had more than two big power brokers that had everything at stake and no reason to listen to anybody else.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Earlier, when I counted the Members standing, I did not notice that Chris Heaton-Harris was one of them. We will allow three minutes each for those who are standing, which will eat very slightly into the winding-up speeches.

5.20 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I am sorry that I did not stand at the last point, Mr Evans; I thought there were more people behind me. I congratulate the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) on the way she introduced the subject, and I welcome the Minister to his seat in this room, and to his new post as a Minister in the Department. I wish him all the very best.

I stand to speak because, like my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), I was a Member of the European Parliament, so I was elected twice by proportional representation. I was also a student union politician and was elected once by single transferable vote—thank you very much indeed, Socialist Workers party, which managed to flip six votes into my pile at one point to get me elected. I want to raise some points of criticism—constructively, I hope—in this debate.

I understand that democracy has to evolve. It always will, and it absolutely should. I am slightly wary of raising this, but there is an elephant in the room: 52% of people voted in a referendum quite recently, and the democrats in this room are now ignoring it. I would say that is a bit of a problem. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) talked about 44% of votes cast in the last general election being meaningless,

but at this point, I think that 52% of people are feeling that way about their vote in the greatest expression of a democratic vote. As democrats, we should be looking to work out how we can represent people.

I am not in favour of proportional representation. I am in favour of more direct democracy. As a Member of the European Parliament, I saw how proportional representation of a type meant that Belgium could not find a coalition Government for more than a year, because it could not find the group of people who would sit with all the other groups of people in a room to form a proper Government. I sat in a European Parliament to which fascists had been elected because of the type of list system. I sat in a European Parliament where I knew that everyone in the place, including myself, was probably talking to their selectorate, rather than their electorate, because of the way people are selected for list systems under all types of proportional representation.

I fear for the constituency link that so many of us in this place prize. One of the reasons I desperately wanted to get into this place was to represent a community I lived in and truly love. There are other systems that can evolve democracy. I like direct democracy. I have no problem with referendums, though I think we have probably seen the last of them in my lifetime. I have no problem with the California system, or with the direct democracy that the Swiss have. There are other ways of evolving our democracy; proportional representation is not the only one.

5.23 pm

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Change UK): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) on initiating this debate. I will try to make three quick points in the three minutes that I have.

First, while I do not want to repeat the points made in favour of proportional representation—hon. Members can take it as a given that I agree with them all—the big problem, which the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) mentioned, is that our system is a two-party system. It is essentially rigged in favour of two parties. That worked, one could argue, in a Britain of a different age, when our country was essentially divided between the interests of business and capital on the one hand, and the interests of labour on the other. We cannot divide up our country in that way in this day and age. I do not see how two political parties can possibly do justice to the modern tapestry that is Britain, and to the range of interests within it. Traditionally, the response to that argument has been that they are closed coalitions of interests in any event—that they are broad churches. They are not broad churches. I know, because I used to be a member of one. They are straining to keep those divisions and different interests in one place.

We therefore end up with the absurdity that on an issue as crucial as the national security of our country—“What would you do with the future of our nuclear deterrent?”—we have a whole group of people in the Labour party, which I know well, who are committed to retaining the nuclear deterrent, but a leadership and a potential Prime Minister saying that they will never use that nuclear deterrent. I use that simply to illustrate the unsustainability of the system, and how impossible it is for the two main parties in British politics to do the job in the way they used to.

Surely it is better and more honest to have open coalitions governing together. Perhaps each of the two main parties in this country should become two or even three parties. In practice they might govern together, but at least everybody would know where everybody stood and people would not have to pretend that they agreed with each other when they did not. It would make for an altogether more honest system of politics.

Secondly, the other problem with the system is that millions of people in this country vote for a party not because they want to, but because they think they have to in order to keep the other lot out, or because it is the least worst option. How can we go on with a system that forces people to make that kind of choice? If I am wrong about that and people do want to vote for those parties, why does poll after poll show that when we have the Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister and “Don’t know” lined up as the options available to people, “Don’t know” scores much more highly than any other option? Thirdly—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but your three minutes is up. In fact, you have gone over the limit.

Chuka Umunna: Can I finish the sentence?

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Go on, then.

Chuka Umunna: I am very grateful. Thirdly, to address the point about extremism, we can get around that in any system of proportional representation—as they do in Germany, where they know those dangers all too well—by having a threshold that parties must exceed in order to be able to stand in an election. That is all I wanted to say; I am grateful for your indulgence, Mr Evans.

5.26 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

I am a Lib Dem partly because I believe that we need extraordinary change in our political system. I am delighted by the damascene conversion that has happened, but as hon. Members have eloquently said, when someone is under the umbrella of a party that helps to deliver the safe seats, it is all too easy for them to forget that they are not necessarily representing everyone in the constituency. While I appreciate what some have said about ensuring that they as MPs are there for everyone, I think we all know of Members of this House who do not always behave that way, and who, because they are in a safe seat, choose instead to campaign to and speak to only the part of their electorate that they feel will deliver them the next election. Whatever proportional system we end up delivering, it must fundamentally challenge that situation.

I say that having won a marginal constituency at the last snap general election. We were nearly 10,000 votes behind the Conservatives in Oxford West and Abingdon. I will be perfectly honest: I did not think I would win. When I found out the election was happening, I called up a future employer, with whom I had taken a job as a deputy head—it was my first deputy headship, and I was really excited—and said, “If you want to make some money, put a bet against me. There’s no way I can make that up in one election.” I am sorry to say that they lost money, but I will go to their prize-giving in a few weeks’ time, so that is the quid pro quo.

[Layla Moran]

The question is how we did it in Oxford West and Abingdon. Anyone who has ever campaigned will have seen Lib Dem election leaflets saying, “X can’t win here,” and that is what we did in my constituency. The Labour party vote came over. I was in a pub the other day, having a pint with some of the chaps who are often there, and one said, “I’m a member of the Labour party, and I can’t tell you I voted for you, because I’d get thrown out of the party.” He should not have had to make that confession. He should not have to hide that from people. The fact is that we won because of a broad church of voters. I appreciate and understand that I was not his top choice, but he was happy to say, “I’m proud to have voted for you anyway.” We had to get to the point where the Green party stood down in Oxford West and Abingdon to send that message, so that we could win. Yes, we made up that difference. I live in a marginal constituency, and am I happy about that.

What kind of system would I want? I advocate something like alternative vote plus. A lot of work was done on this a long time ago. We need a root-and-branch reform of the whole way that we do politics. That should cover not just proportional systems, but overseas electors and votes at 16. We need a proper look at the entire convention on how we do politics in this country—not just the x in the box, but everything, including how we campaign and how we represent people. That is why we need a more proportional system.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order.

5.30 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I will give two examples of proportional representation working and helping democracy in this country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) pointed out, I served in the Scottish Parliament. Both before and after I was a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I was a highland councillor. When I was first a highland councillor, I was a single member for a ward, and I had the ward discretionary fund—a pot of £40k or £50k—which I could dish out to good causes in my ward without really checking with anyone at all. It was like having the power of a medieval prince.

When I became a councillor again after having been in the Scottish Parliament, there was this thing called the single transferable vote, and I had to share the ward with two other members. Oh, horror! How difficult! My favourite charities did not necessarily get the money I wanted to give them; I had to argue it out with the other two members of the ward. To me, that is an improvement in democracy and in the representation of the people. I was more accountable under the wider PR system than before. That was my experience of local government.

In between those times, I was an MSP. I was an additional Member, elected under PR. I will give two slightly off-the-wall reasons why that system is good. First, anyone who knows about Scotland, and anyone who was in this place long enough ago, will remember one Margo MacDonald. She graced Westminster and Holyrood. She was a member of the Scottish National party, and also went independent. She was elected in Edinburgh through her own merits and her own character. Holyrood would have been a much poorer place without Margo.

I have waited a long time to put that on the record. She was a splendid lady, and I feel greatly enriched to have known her.

Secondly—I will shut up in a second, to make it easier for you, Mr Evans—the 1997 election had a result that I am sure gratified many people, including people like me in Scotland, but did not gratify others: the Conservative party got precisely no seats north of the border. It was wiped out. That was bad news for those now on the Government Benches. However, in 1999, under PR, the Conservatives came back with 18 seats in Holyrood, which was a bit of a shock to me and others.

I will continue to argue to my dying day that although I do not approve of the good fortunes of the Conservative party—no offence to the Minister—PR rescued the Tories in Scotland, and that, for those who believe in plural democracy and the right of different sections of society to be heard, was a good thing. At the end of the day, that will be one of my concluding and strongest arguments as to why PR worked: I did not like the result, but it was good for democracy in Scotland that the Tories came back.

5.33 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. Before I start, on behalf of the Scottish National party, I offer my warmest congratulations to English colleagues here, and wish them a happy St George’s day.

All of us in this room consider ourselves democrats, although we may have different interpretations of what that means. For me, two things stand out. First, the elected Parliament ought to, in the broadest possible terms, represent the people who take part in elections to it. Secondly, the country ought to be governed with the consent of a majority of its citizens. By any test, the current first-past-the-post system fails palpably on both counts.

I say that because I note that others who have spoken are from minority parties in the Chamber. They rightly feel aggrieved because they have been punished and penalised by the first-past-the-post system and are under-represented in the Chamber. I say that the system is wrong on behalf of a party that has probably been, in recent years, the greatest beneficiary of the distortions of first past the post. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) referenced the 2017 general election results, but remember what happened in 2015 when, with 50% of the vote, the SNP took 95% of the available seats in Scotland. I cannot defend that as a democratic system. My only defence is that we did not make the rules, and that we were playing by the rules that we were given. However, that is clearly not a sustainable system.

There are other drawbacks, as people have mentioned. First, many people living in a seat that might change hands—a swing seat—feel under a great deal of pressure to vote tactically, which means that they compromise their vote. They do not vote for the person or party who they think represents them, but for somebody who they agree with slightly more than the person they are trying to keep out. Those people do not, under this system, have the opportunity or right to express their political aspirations in an election. Of course, it is even worse in safe seats, where people feel that their vote is simply wasted—that there is no point to it. They could go out and vote for a lifetime—some do—and the party that they vote for will never represent them in this Parliament.

All that would be bad enough, but it cannot go on, because as more people see that this is not the natural order of things, and that people elsewhere in the world do things differently, it begins to fuel great disillusionment with our entire political process. In some parts, that results in people being apathetic and not taking part in the system. However, much more worrying is the building resentment that people feel about the futility of the system and the way in which it denies their democratic expression. That is why it is urgent that we begin to review, and to consider change.

I am pleased to note that, in comparison with many constitutional debates in Westminster Hall, this is a relatively well-attended discussion. It is also a thoughtful discussion, in that colleagues—I note, in particular, from the two major parties—have spoken about the need to consider change, and have said that things cannot continue as they are. Before we debate the practicalities of what system might replace the current one, we have to agree on the principles. I always find it strange that when we state the principle that a party's representatives in Parliament ought to be in proportion to the votes cast for that party in the election, nobody disagrees; they tend to say that it is a noble idea, but that for various practical reasons, it will never work, so we should never bother doing it. If we believe that that principle is worth defending, it is incumbent on all of us, cross party, to begin at least looking at whether we could change the system in order to express that principle in our constitutional arrangements. I think that we could.

Some arguments about practicalities, when examined, are not the great hurdles that people pretend. People talk about a break in the constituency link, for example. There are proportional systems that explicitly maintain a direct link between a constituency and its representative. Indeed, we have that system—the additional member system—for the Scottish Parliament, and it works. One representative in the Scottish Parliament for the area where I live is Kezia Dugdale, an MSP for the Labour party. She is elected on a Lothian-wide list along with seven other people, but she has no hesitation in describing herself as the MP for Edinburgh, and in popping up everywhere, trying to represent and advocate on behalf of the city. That works with other parties as well. As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said, STV was a lifeline for the Scottish Conservative party, allowing it representation that it would not otherwise have had.

The argument is put about that PR leads to unstable government, but the last few years have shown that the current system does not do very well in that regard either.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I will be very brief, Mr Evans. The hon. Gentleman and I have long been on the same side on this issue, and I agree that it is heartening to see support growing for the case for reform. However, it is not only the last few years that have shown the fallacy of the strong government argument for first past the post. If we dip into history, there is the 1970s and the Lib-Lab pact, or the relationship between Sir John Major's Government and the Ulster Unionist party. It has not been the case that first past the post has delivered stable Governments for the UK. Where it has been stable, it has not always been good government, when that majority has been artificially put in place.

Tommy Sheppard: The hon. Gentleman makes the point well, and I agree with him.

First past the post does not allow for political dialogue and discussion, but keeps it under wraps and prevents it. Compromises are made behind closed doors within major parties and are not expressed in public debate. That seems very unhealthy for our democracy. It is also unsustainable, given the 24-hour news cycle; people need only pick up their phone to find out what is happening in every aspect of their life, in great detail. Those arrangements might have been satisfactory for the 19th century, but they certainly are not for the 21st century. I think they have to change.

Let us get the political debate out in the open; that is what a proportional system would allow. There would be more parties, and they would have to form alliances in order to govern, but it would be transparent. People would see what deals were being made and what policies were being jettisoned in order to allow others to come through.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I will not, because I have only two minutes left.

Others have remarked that all these practical obstacles to PR suggest that nobody has ever tried it, but the truth is that we have proportional representation systems—not just in Scotland, but in Wales, in Northern Ireland and in this city, for the London Assembly. It does not lead to the catastrophe that many suggest; indeed, it works fairly well.

I want to suggest what we can do. I welcome this debate. I am sure that the Minister will take a good stab at defending the Government's position, but I know what he will say, if I am honest. I am more interested in what the Opposition spokesperson will say. All the opposition parties in this Parliament of minorities need to begin a dialogue among themselves, because if the Government will not offer change, we need to prepare to see what a new election and a new Parliament might do. That dialogue needs to happen. In that regard, I commend the work of Make Votes Matter, which has begun to focus on not just particular systems, but the guiding principles behind the systems, so that we design a system to achieve our objectives. I hope that the Labour party will join the other minority parties in this Chamber in advocating those principles.

5.45 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), to his new position, and wish the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) all the best on her maternity leave. I am sure that he will ably cover her post.

Before addressing proportional representation, I want to highlight the feeling, which has come up in the debate, that the current political system is in need of change. The Minister will be getting to grips with the brief, but he will be well aware that our electoral laws are out of date and need looking at as a matter of urgency. Millions of people are missing from the electoral roll, dark money is influencing politics and public trust is at an all-time low.

[Cat Smith]

This debate is about proportional representation. It is important to acknowledge that, as with every electoral system, there are pros and cons to first past the post. Simplicity is the key benefit of first past the post, because it gives the electorate one vote for the candidate or party they support. The other great benefit is the constituency link. As Member of Parliament for Lancaster and Fleetwood, when I go out and speak to my constituents, as I did over Easter, many of them greet me by name—they know me. I do not think they have the same relationship with their MEPs, whom they probably could not name and would not recognise if they fell over them in the queue for the bus.

I have outlined the advantages, but there are cons to first past the post, which have been outlined by many speakers in this debate. The current voting system has been under growing scrutiny. A traditional argument in favour of first past the post was that it had a history of returning stable single-party Governments. That has been well and truly debunked since 2010. Analysis of the 2017 general election also demonstrates the limitations of our voting system. That election saw a rise in marginal seats: 11 seats were won by fewer than 100 votes. Analysis by the Electoral Reform Society found that less than 0.0017% of voters choosing differently would have given the Conservative party a majority.

Moving on to proportional voting systems, proportional representation has a number of good arguments in its favour. It is right for Parliament to reflect the political will of the people—who would not argue that a country should have a Parliament that looks like the politics of its people. I do not think that anyone can disagree with that principle. A proportional voting system would give voters the opportunity to vote for people they believe in, rather than voting tactically to stop the party that they like least.

I am sure that every political party taking part in this debate has at some point or another said to a voter, “Please support me, because if you don’t support me the other guy will get in.” As well as smaller parties standing aside in some seats at the last general election, the Electoral Reform Society estimates that 6.5 million people voted tactically. As I said, they were voting for parties that were not necessarily their first choice in order to stop the party that they perceived to be more likely to win in their area.

PR is of course well established in the UK. There are forms of it in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and here in London, for the Assembly elections. They all use proportional systems, which means that most voters in this country at some point have used more than one electoral system. In Scotland, where STV is used in local government elections, voters have demonstrated that they are capable of using more than one system and more complex systems than first past the post. Finally, all the UK-based proportional systems—except for the closed lists used in European elections—have the strong constituency basis that is incredibly important for any voting system.

Personally, I am on the record supporting PR. However, a major constitutional change such as this must have the support of the public. For example, in the 2011 AV referendum, to which I am sure the Minister will refer in his speech, 32% of voters supported AV, but the

vast majority rejected it. AV is not, however, a form of proportional representation, and public opinion may well have changed since then. What has not changed is that our democracy is still fundamentally broken. I do not believe that changing our voting system alone is some magic wand that will fix the problems or mend the disconnect felt by so many voters in this country.

Millions of people across the UK feel that politics does not work for them, and it is not hard to see why. Communities are often affected by decisions over which they have no say or, even when they think they have a say, a Government can come in to override it, as in Lancashire in the case of fracking. Many people feel that what goes on in Westminster is a world away from the reality of their lives. Research published by the Hansard Society found that the UK public are increasingly disenchanted with the system of governing.

To move on to Labour’s position, Labour is committed to root-and-branch transformation of the archaic political structures and cultures of this country which work for the few and not the many. At the last general election, our manifesto committed to establishing a constitutional convention to examine and advise on reforming the way in which Britain works at a fundamental level. We will consult on the convention’s forms and terms of reference, and invite recommendations on extending democracy. The convention will bring together individuals and organisations from across civil society, and will act as the driving force behind our democratic agenda.

As well as looking at different voting systems, the convention will look at extending democracy locally, regionally and nationally, and will consider the option of a more federalised country. Of course, a constitutional convention could look at other issues to do with democratic accountability, including whether MPs who change parties and cross the Floor should face by-elections. This is about where power and sovereignty lie in politics, in the economy and in the justice system, as well as in our communities. The convention will build a popular mandate for the deep-seated political change that this country needs.

As I said, it is important that we look at different voting systems as part of a wider package of constitutional and electoral reforms, to address the growing democratic deficit across Britain. That is the change that we must see.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): In welcoming the Minister to his place, I ask him to leave at least one minute for the proposer, Angela Smith.

5.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): Thank you, Mr Evans. I will make sure to follow your guidance and leave a minute at the end. I thank hon. Members, particularly the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), for their warm wishes for my first debate in this role.

The Government welcome this debate and the opportunity to address the important issues that have been raised by hon. Members, as well as the online engagement around the debate. Unsurprisingly, hon. Members have made their arguments eloquently, but given the time, I will not have a chance to analyse each individual point—not least given the myriad systems

that have been suggested, which could take some time to explain. Ultimately, how we select our representatives in Parliament is of fundamental importance and hon. Members rightly have strong views. The voting system used by voters is central to that concern and goes to the heart of our democracy. The Government are committed to ensuring that the laws governing our elections are clear and accessible, and generate the greatest degree of confidence in the outcome of elections.

Under the first-past-the-post system, electors select their preferred candidate for their constituency. The candidate with the largest number of votes wins and the party with the largest number of elected candidates may form the Government, if they achieve the confidence of the House.

Layla Moran: Does the Minister accept that people are often voting for someone who is not their preferred candidate? Under first past the post, they are voting for someone they like best and who they think can actually win, which leads to large numbers of people feeling as if they have been cheated of their first preference.

Kevin Foster: Everyone has a choice as to how they use their vote. Even under the alternative vote system, which the Liberal Democrats argued for in the referendum seven years ago, people would find themselves having to make a decision when they got to their second or third choice, and in fact, their vital choice might be the fourth or fifth one, which they did not believe would necessarily be the vital one.

People have a choice and they know the impact of their vote and how it might choose a Government. Under any voting system, people have a choice to make about how they wish to use their vote: do they wish to vote for a major party that may select and put forward the Prime Minister or for a minor party so that it can be represented in the House of Commons? I do not think that any voting system, particularly if we want to maintain the constituency link, which many hon. Members have said is important, or if we have single-Member constituencies and a Member of Parliament already secures more than 50% of the votes cast, will change the overall outcome.

The first-past-the-post system is a clear and robust way of electing Members of Parliament. It is well understood by the electorate, and they know how their representatives in Parliament are selected and the impact of their vote. Crucially, it ensures a clear link between elected representative and constituent in a manner that proportional representation systems do not. That ensures that MPs can represent the interests of their constituents when debating national issues. The Government therefore do not support proportional representation for parliamentary elections because they consider it to be more opaque and complicated without delivering the clear benefits of the first-past-the-post system.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. One point that I do not think has been made is that first past the post gives a clear link between the elector and not only the individual, but the manifesto, so people can see whether that is delivered.

Kevin Foster: I agree that first past the post creates a clear link that sometimes proportional representation systems do not.

As we committed in our manifesto to retaining first past the post for parliamentary elections, we have no plans to change the voting system for elections to the House of Commons. As we have touched on, under first past the post, individual Members of Parliament represent electors in a defined constituency. The link between hon. Members and their constituents is a core feature of our parliamentary democracy.

Constituents have a distinct parliamentary representative who is directly accountable to them and can be clearly seen to represent them. The representation is less obvious when someone is elected under a proportional representation system where larger multi-Member constituencies are used. In such circumstances, smaller communities are likely to be subsumed into a larger area and there is a risk that their particular interests and concerns will not be fully taken into account.

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

Furthermore, proportional representation systems can still result in outcomes that many deem undesirable. A party that does not win the poll, and that potentially even loses seats, can still end up forming the Government, so voters have a Government that they did not vote for. Under proportional voting systems, voters may not really know what policies they end up voting for, as the successful parties will be those best able to negotiate a deal in a coalition after an election, rather than necessarily those that secure the most support from the electorate.

Crucially, given the party of the hon. Member who secured the debate, party list systems give parties and their leaders the most control over the make-up of lists of candidates, and ultimately, who will end up in this place. As my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) said, that can result in elected representatives who are more focused on the selectorate than the electorate, compared with single-Member constituencies under first past the post.

First past the post provides for a clear and straightforward count that usually needs to be conducted only once, or repeated only if it is tight, and that produces a clear outcome on the evening. Electoral systems used to achieve a proportionally representative outcome are often more complex than the first past the post system, which makes the impact of one person's vote less clear. Systems such as the single transferable vote require ballots to be counted multiple times to allocate seats, which potentially obscures the impact of each vote on the result.

The ability of the first-past-the-post system to produce an uncomplicated and accurate count means that a result is produced more quickly, normally during the night following the poll, with an overall result early the next day. A timely, clear and secure result is in the interest of all parties and the country as a whole. Given the significant advantages of a first-past-the-post system, there would need to be compelling policy reasons for the Government to embrace a system that is less clear for voters and more complicated, and that could see someone's third, fourth or even fifth choice for their constituency being the crucial choice they make, as I have touched on.

The current closed-list voting system for European Parliament elections was first used in 1999 and the turnout at that poll was 24%. That was significantly lower than the turnout of 36.4% at the previous European

[Kevin Foster]

Parliament election held under the first-past-the-post system. Although turnouts have increased in more recent European Parliament elections, that is because they have been combined with first-past-the-post local elections taking place on the same day. It is clear that just shifting to a new voting system does not necessarily boost turnout, despite the arguments in 1999 from people who stated that the system would do that.

Jonathan Reynolds: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: I will not, given the time. I want to allow time for the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) who secured the debate.

The first-past-the-post system is well established in the United Kingdom. Consequently, elections using first past the post produce lower numbers of rejected ballot papers compared with other systems, including proportional representation systems. For those reasons, the Government support the continued use of the first-past-the-post system for the House of Commons.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: I will not, given the time. I want to allow time for the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge who secured the debate to wind up.

In 2011, the United Kingdom conducted a referendum on whether the voting system to elect Members of Parliament should be changed from first past the post. The system on offer was the alternative vote system, which would allow electors to rank their candidates in order of preference, and if one candidate received more than half the votes, they would be elected. The point was made that it was very similar and would not affect seats where people already had more than 50% of the vote.

Electors voted overwhelmingly against changing the system. More than 13 million people—more than two-thirds of those who voted—voted in favour of retaining first past the post. It would be hard to justify ignoring the democratic verdict in the referendum, and equally hard to make a case for a further referendum on a more

radical reform such as proportional representation, when that more modest AV proposal was defeated so resoundingly.

This has been an interesting debate and I thank hon. Members for their contributions. Hon. Members from all parties have talked about the importance of ensuring popular engagement, transparency and integrity in our electoral system. I take on board the comments of the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood. There is work to be done to ensure that people feel engaged in our democratic system—that they feel they have a stake and a voice in it.

I tentatively say to hon. Members present that one of the times when people felt they had a direct say in the future of their country was when they voted in the June 2016 referendum and every vote in every part of the United Kingdom counted for exactly the same. Many feel that the way to restore and introduce trust to our electoral system is to deliver the result of that referendum.

For now, the Government have no plans to change the voting system for elections to the House of Commons. Although the debate has been of interest, the Government will focus their time on other areas to build wider democratic engagement and the faith in our democratic system that we all wish to see.

5.59 pm

Angela Smith: This has been a thoughtful and good-humoured debate, to which it is impossible to do justice in one minute. Various hon. Members have contributed and I have listened carefully to what has been said.

On the points about extremism and our electoral system, I will say just this. No electoral system can resist the power of ideas indefinitely. We can put thresholds in place, as in Germany, but in the end, nothing can stop it. With an open, honest approach, however, we can at least fight extremism at the ballot box, as my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) pointed out.

What do we do if the two major parties in a two-party system are captured by the extremists? What does the voter do then? They are left powerless in the system that we have. That risk feels more real to me now than ever in my lifetime. It is time for change, and we need to deliver it now.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Mental Health Services: Leeds

6 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered mental health services in Leeds.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

I requested this debate with some reluctance, because I did not want to believe that mental health services in my city—a city that I have lived in for 40 years and which I have been privileged to represent for the past 22 years—were so appalling, especially when compared with other cities and regions in this country. Sadly, however, when I met my constituent Charley Downey two months ago at a routine advice surgery, the evidence that she presented to me on behalf of her husband was so damning and shocking that I felt that there was no other option than to bring their concerns to the attention of this House and hopefully to the attention of the Government, so that appropriate action could be taken to put right a gross injustice being done to so many of my constituents, as well as those of my seven fellow Leeds MPs from across the House, and those of MPs in the broader area, such as York MPs.

The Government have acknowledged on many occasions over the past few years that mental health services across the country are under-resourced and they have promised remedial action, but one of the biggest problems is the uneven distribution of funding, as I have mentioned. The waiting list for treatment in Leeds is approximately 48 to 52 weeks, once a patient is actually put on the waiting list. However, that requires a prior diagnosis by a qualified nurse, or a “formulation”—because nurses are not permitted to make diagnoses. If a patient is suicidal, then even a few hours on a waiting list may be too much, or in the worst cases possibly fatal, but to wait for a year is simply appalling. Compare that waiting-list time with, say, that of East Lancashire, which is 12 weeks, or that of the London Borough of Hillingdon, which is six weeks, or that of Cheshire, which is nine weeks, and I am sure that the Minister will understand my concern and the deep anxiety of my constituents.

Andy Downey first attended his GP’s surgery on 8 November 2016 with serious concerns about his depression. He was given a leaflet about a service called “Improving Access to Psychological Therapies”, or IAPT, and he had a blood test, which subsequently showed that he had a folate deficiency, for which vitamin D supplements were supplied.

Ten months later, in October 2017, with his symptoms worsening and the supplements failing to help, Mr Downey attended his GP’s surgery again. A week later, after suffering a full panic attack and breathing difficulties, he was referred back to his GP, who suggested that Mr Downey refer himself to the IAPT through a website called Mindwell. The problem was that Mindwell has no mental health content or referral option to the IAPT, apart from a phone number. Andy rang that number, which went straight through to voicemail. His GP had told him that Mindwell was the only way to get a referral to the IAPT, but when Mrs Downey phoned the mental health trust—the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust—she was told that the GP had

given her husband the wrong advice, and the trust accepted Mrs Downey’s request for treatment as a referral. Therefore, Andy’s initial assessment meeting finally took place on 5 February 2018. Charley Downey has provided me with almost four pages of information about dates, times, meetings, appointments and lack of outcomes, all of which I can make available to the Minister, if she so wishes, or to the trust, which should already have this information.

When I first met Charley on 16 February, I was appalled not only at the way in which her husband had been treated but by the state of mental health services in Leeds, which this case seemed to typify. On 19 February, I wrote to Dr Sara Munro, chief executive of the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, to express my concerns about the case of Andy Downey and to raise the issues of underfunding for mental health provision in general across the region.

I asked Dr Munro what her perspective was on the difficulty of accessing mental health care through the NHS at present and why the trust had decided to use online tools rather than face-to-face therapy, when it seemed to me—purely a layman—that mental illness is one area in which human interaction and sensitive expert clinical judgement might be essential.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and my fellow Leeds MP for bringing this important issue to the House; we all have constituents who have suffered in a similar way to his constituent.

Recently, I visited Morley Newlands Academy in my constituency during mental health week. I, for one, think we need to tackle mental health issues at a young age. Representatives of Place2Be, a charity, were there, having come into the school to offer a variety of services. I saw the value of raising the awareness of mental health at such a young age. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to ensure that children in schools, even primary schools, receive the support they need, and that we also support the charities involved, to ensure that they get the funding to continue their good work?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend—if I may call her that—and my colleague from Leeds for her intervention, because she makes a very important point, namely that we need to begin at the earliest possible age. It is tragic to me, and I am sure to every Member of this House, that an increasing number of young people are showing signs of depression and other mental health problems, and that is evident in our schools. The role of charities is very important, but so is the role of the national health service. Although we need to support those charities, as she rightly says, we also need to ensure that we have the resources within our NHS too.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate, because the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust lost the main contract with our clinical commissioning group as the result of a litany of failures in my constituency, including ignoring three Care Quality Commission reports, which put mental health patients in my constituency at serious risk. My question today is this: will the Minister review the licence of that trust to operate, or not, in light of the consequences of its actions and the harm it has caused?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. York is a city that I know well, and of course York and Leeds are united together through the partnership trust. I will now go on to detail my own experience with the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, because my experience is similar to the experience that many of her constituents have discussed. The points she makes are very valid and I would be very interested to hear what the Minister has to say in response, not only to her intervention but to what I am about to say.

The reply to my letter to Dr Sara Munro, the chief executive of the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, was dated 1 March, and it was written by Samantha Marshall of the complaints team, who said she was

“sorry that you have reason to make a complaint and, as a trust, we have failed to meet your expectations.”

Bear in mind that I had written on behalf of my constituent and that I had raised other issues. Ms Marshall went on to say that the trust has had no contact with Mr Downey since he was referred to the IAPT, which is provided by Leeds Community Healthcare, and that she would forward my letter to LCH if I wished. However, no reference was made to any of the other more general questions that I had asked Dr Munro, questions that I believe are highly pertinent to the treatment that my constituent received, and to the treatment that many of my fellow Leeds MPs’ constituents have received as a result of the severe underfunding of mental health services in our area.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend from Leeds North East is making an excellent speech. I had a similar case with one of my constituents, who visited her GP on 31 December 2018 to say that she felt suicidal. She was asked to go home and told that the crisis team would contact her. The crisis team did not contact her. Four hours later, she returned to her GP and then had to go by ambulance to Jimmy’s—St. James’s University Hospital. She waited in accident and emergency for 20 hours. Eventually, the acute liaison team gave her a leaflet. That was the level of intervention that she experienced. It was not until my office intervened with the IAPT that she got a referral, and by then she had already made another suicide attempt. That is how the services in Leeds were delivered in the case of my constituent.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend, whose constituency is next door to mine. As I suspected when I requested this debate, there are cases all over the city of Leeds—probably all over the country, but certainly in the Leeds and York area—that highlight the inadequacy of mental health services and the maze that people have to navigate if they need them. That is a source of huge concern.

Andrea Jenkyns: A couple of years ago, I had a memorable case of a gentleman who was suffering from horrific mental issues and had attempted suicide several times. On one occasion, after he had slit his wrists, he went to A&E. There was no joint communication; his GP, who was supporting him, did not even know about the incident. Does the hon. Gentleman think we need to ensure that the NHS systems talk to each other a lot better and that there is a much more joined-up approach?

Fabian Hamilton: Yes. I thank the hon. Lady for her point. That is one of the problems: it is a maze. If people are told to refer themselves through a website, which can then refer them to another organisation that is supposed to allow them to make an appointment, and they then leave a message on voicemail and it is never responded to, that is shocking in itself. The example my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) gave of the ambulance and the waiting in A&E, and then the lack of credible resources and assistance from the mental health services, highlights the scale of the problem.

After the date for this debate was published, I was contacted by Healthwatch England, which told me that Healthwatch Leeds was about to publish a report on mental health in Leeds and that it would be happy for me to use some of the report’s data and conclusions in the debate. Unfortunately, owing to unforeseen circumstances, the publication of the report has been delayed, but to show that Andy Downey’s is not an isolated case, here is a quote from one of the 697 people in Leeds—I do not know his or her name—who gave evidence for the report during the first three months of 2019:

“I do not know what is wrong with the entire Trust. I had waited since February for a referral to the CMHT”—

the community mental health team—

“I was seen in August. I was discharged, told to talk to IAPT. IAPT has its own waiting lists. As a result of not being able to prove I accepted, I lost everything. I DID NOT REFUSE TREATMENT!! NONE WAS OFFERED!! Today I phoned the crisis team in tears, and they said ‘contact your GP in the morning’. I have no job, I have no money, I went through over 6 months waiting for a simple appointment. I am struggling, and the best the crisis team can do is say ‘contact your GP’. My GP referred me to the CMHT because I was suicidal. Can’t believe the crisis team said ‘tell your GP’. I have been telling my GP, who couldn’t handle it, so he sought help. Today I found out I lost my job, and I will soon be homeless, because my home is provided by my employer. I was suicidal and depressed before today... can’t the crisis team show some empathy and realise some things are a tipping point?”

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am not a Leeds Member, but what the hon. Gentleman has highlighted in that moving passage is the need for GP training in this area, right across the country. Is it not time that we got that training right?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important intervention. He is absolutely right. It is clear from what I, and all of us, have seen that all GPs need far better training in how to deal with mental health issues.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It seems extraordinary that it is not compulsory for GPs to be trained in mental health. That is something that the Royal College of General Practitioners would like to change and something I hope the Minister will be able to pick up and work on. On the capacity in Yorkshire and the Humber, general and adult psychiatry at ST4 in 2017 had 20 places for trainee psychiatrists, only six of which were filled, and for dual general adult and older adult there were two places, none of which were filled. How much does the hon. Gentleman believe that a lack of staff resources contributes towards the poor care available to his constituent?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important point. I know that staff—competent and qualified staff—are needed to fulfil the expectations and the demands, but I do not know why that is. Is it under-funding or under-resourcing, or simply that there are not enough trained personnel available to fill the posts? Or is it that the level of training, competence and experience is not sufficient for the demands of the posts? That is something we will have to explore and I hope the Minister will also make it one of her priorities.

The quote I read out is a truly damning condemnation of the trust, not in my words, but in the words of someone crying out for help and cruelly being denied it, through, I believe, a mixture of incompetence, complacency, under-funding and—I am reluctant to say this—a bit of callousness too. Lives are being put at risk by the crisis and the question I would ask above every other is: why is Leeds so inadequate and so poorly funded compared with many other parts of England?

Let me come back to my constituent, Andy Downey. Andy was placed on the waiting list for mental health treatment in April 2018, with an estimated date for his first appointment in November or December of that year. That was subsequently extended to March 2019. However, in the meantime he experienced an unrelated physical health issue, in November 2018, and was sent to a private hospital—Spire Leeds Hospital in Roundhay—to see a surgeon, as they were contracting NHS services. That appointment was in December last year. He was told that he needed exploratory surgery to resolve the issue, which would be scheduled “after Christmas”. When no update had been received by January 2019, Charley chased the matter, only to be told that the hospital had tried to call but “hadn’t got through”. However, no calls or messages had been received by the Downeys. The surgery was subsequently scheduled for May 2019—next month. Because Andy will apparently not be able to attend mental health treatment while waiting for surgery—I am not sure why—his mental health treatment has been cancelled and he has been placed back on the bottom of the waiting list to start the whole process again. The current waiting list is 10 months.

Let me summarise Andy Downey’s case, for the Minister’s benefit—I am sorry, I am eating into her time: it took longer than a year, and multiple GP appointments, just to get a mental health referral, and then only after an ambulance attended. Referral for assessment took four months. From assessment to recommending prescription for antidepressants to receiving a prescription took an additional two months. The waiting list from decision on treatment to first treatment session took 49 weeks. It took 18 months from first contact to get an antidepressant prescription. It took 29 months from first contact to initial treatment appointment. It then took another 10 to 11 months to restart treatment because of the failure of a private company to schedule unrelated surgery. I am sure that the Minister will agree that that is totally unacceptable. Mental health services are often as urgent and necessary as physical health treatment, yet they are treated almost as a Cinderella service. The fragmentation and under-resourcing of mental health services, especially in Leeds, means that lives are often at risk.

We have had several debates in the House over the past few years about depression and the effect that it can have on the individual and everyone who cares about that person, with a few brave MPs telling the House and

the public what they have suffered, but unless we make our mental health a priority, we will have more and more cases like that of Andy Downey and his wife Charley—who is present here today, and has had to carry the burden of incompetent and inadequate public services on her shoulders. Although we live in one of the richest societies in the world, we cannot, it seems, organise and fund the very services that will help to bring so many people afflicted with mental illness and depression back into mainstream society. It is a condemnation of us all that couples such as the Downeys have had to bring their shocking experience into the public domain through their Member of Parliament. I salute their courage, but feel angry on their behalf.

Finally, will the Minister answer these questions or, if she is unable to do so, will she write to me after the debate? First, what mechanism do the Government have to ensure that mental health services are delivered equally across the country? Secondly, does the Minister really believe that the private sector has a beneficial role in delivering mental health services? Thirdly, will she intervene by raising with the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust the issues that I have drawn to her attention in this debate? I hope, for the benefit of the Downeys and on behalf of the many thousands like them across our city, that mental health services can be given the priority and the resources they need in order to ensure a healthier and better society for us all.

6.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for the passionate and articulate speech he has made on behalf of his constituents.

I often get frustrated by debates about the NHS, which are all about inputs—how much money is being spent, or what the size of the workforce is—and not enough about the direct patient experience and whether what we have is delivering the right outcomes. The story that the hon. Gentleman has shared illustrates that, for a lot of people experiencing mental ill health, their journey towards getting care is not always optimal. That is for a whole host of reasons, including historical issues regarding process and how people interact with their services. I will go away and take a deeper look at what he has highlighted, because it is a very good example of how things can go wrong.

As I say, the issue is not just about money, because we have made money available to all clinical commissioning groups. The hon. Gentleman has asked why, when we are making money available at an increased rate across the board, mental health services are so much worse in Leeds than elsewhere. As is so often the case with these things, a lot of it is about leadership. One issue that has been specifically raised with me is that often, the person responsible for commissioning mental health services within a CCG is not as senior as others. They are not as experienced, and that can cause weaknesses in commissioning.

It is important that we take action centrally to make sure that we deliver services more consistently, and I expect that to be achieved through the Care Quality Commission. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) raised specific concerns about her

[*Jackie Doyle-Price*]

local trust. The CQC's inspection report last year said that the trust requires improvement, so I fully expect it to work collaboratively with the CQC to take the steps that it is advised to take, in order to improve its performance when providing care. That CQC scrutiny will continue until the relevant improvement in performance is delivered.

NHS England also demands that CCGs achieve the mental health investment standard. Under that criterion, CCGs are bound to spend more of the additional money they receive on mental health services than their overall increase in budget. We expect NHS England to take direct action to secure that. However, that is not the whole story, because it depends on what CCGs are commissioning.

One of the messages that I have been keen to give CCGs is that delivering good outcomes for people suffering from mental ill health is not just about clinical services; the voluntary sector can play a big role. I have challenged CCGs to use some of their budgets to commission services directly from the voluntary sector. When someone is suffering a mental health crisis, they need help to navigate the system. In the example that the hon. Member for Leeds North East shared, that help was clearly not forthcoming from the GP.

Having someone with an understanding of mental health who can help a person suffering a crisis navigate through the system is clearly beneficial and, frankly, is good value for money. We should not spend all our NHS budgets on clinical staff when that additional support can deliver so much. In the case that the hon. Gentleman outlined, the GP did not do as much as he could have done, so we perhaps need to consider what else we can do to make sure that GPs understand that system. Again, the voluntary sector has a role to play.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkins) mentioned having more mental health education in schools, which is an issue that we are taking forward. She specifically mentioned Place2Be, which is a good example of how a third-sector organisation can work with the NHS to deliver the right outcomes. We are in the process of rolling out a whole new workforce in our schools to do exactly as my hon. Friend has challenged us to do.

On people who have attempted suicide, I readily concede that patients in such circumstances have not had a joined-up service between their GPs and their primary care providers. However, through the liaison psychiatry teams that we are rolling out in A&E, we intend to make sure that that wrap-around care is provided more readily.

Dr Poulter: Will the Minister give way?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will, although I was just about to come to my hon. Friend's point.

Dr Poulter: Suicides are very unpredictable, and a lot of people who attempt to take their own life were not previously known to services—whether their GP or psychiatric services. The problem with mental health services in Leeds and elsewhere is that community services have been completely hollowed out by funding cuts over many years. Unless we invest in community services to stop people ending up in crisis in the first place, we are not going to solve the problem of suicide or deliberate self-harm, or provide help to those who really need it. I hope that the Government are going to get a grip on that problem and push it through NHS England and CCGs.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we try to deliver a transformational step change in the level of service, one of the problems is that we end up raising expectations quicker than we can deliver on them, because we need a whole workforce that is able to deliver. I note my hon. Friend's points about the number of people applying for psychiatric posts; we need to do much more to encourage people. We have spent a lot of time raising awareness of mental health and put a huge amount of investment into psychological therapies. However, at the heart of the forward plan for the next 10 years is a recognition that we need much more service available in the community, and much more help for people with severe mental ill health. I hope that my hon. Friend is reassured by that.

As I have limited time, I will follow up in writing on the other points made by the hon. Member for Leeds North East. As I said, we have made money available in Leeds, but when we look through the prism of someone who needs help and whose journey in getting that care is less than optimal, we clearly need to consider what is going wrong with that care pathway. If someone is vulnerable and needs help, and perhaps does not have a good understanding of mental health or has no experience of it, the whole process is very confusing and distressing.

How we navigate people through the NHS can often feel very inhuman—it is very reliant on process. The hon. Gentleman gave an example of how people are sent online to register, which feels a bit uncomfortable. We need to make sure that we take every opportunity to ensure that the patient is at the heart of this process and that their experience is pleasant, at a time when they are going through great distress. To say, "Here you are: go to this website—you're on your own, so see you later," is not a good start for anyone looking for help.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Leeds North East for having brought this case to my attention, and I pay tribute to Mr and Mrs Downey for sharing their story, because doing so is incredibly difficult. I will look at the specific points that the hon. Gentleman has raised and come back to him.

6.29 pm

Question put and agreed to.

Plastics Recycling

6.29 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,
That this House has considered plastics recycling.

I am grateful for the opportunity to lead an environmental debate after an environmental weekend. I was lucky enough to be part of the Opposition leaders' meeting with Greta Thunberg this morning, which reminded us all that there is a world beyond Brexit.

I want to narrow the discussion to the issue of plastics recycling. I know it is well-trodden territory in many ways. In the past 20 years, a whole body of British legislation and policy has been built on the waste directive. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has four consultations in varying stages of completion. We will no doubt touch on some of those issues. There is also a great deal of very good documentation, including the excellent paper from the Library on plastic waste.

I acknowledge from the outset that the issue is superficially simple, but actually extremely complex. There are many different kinds of plastic, each with different approaches with different costs and benefits. There are many useful and necessary applications. For example, there is an enormous distinction between macroplastics and microplastics. The macroplastics that we talk about in public debate include plastic bottles. Microplastics are built into such things as our clothing and the wear of tyres, and may have even bigger environmental impacts.

I approach the subject from three different directions. First, like many Members, I have been lobbied, through vast numbers of letters, by local schoolchildren about the issues to do with plastics in the ocean. They asked me to raise the issue in Parliament, which I am now doing. In many cases, they were highly motivated by seeing the David Attenborough series, "The Blue Planet". Those arguments have been well rehearsed and I do not need to develop them.

In researching for today, I found some of the facts—perhaps we should call them factoids—surrounding the subject very striking. One was that while plastics are generally very light and buoyant, we are heading to a situation where the weight of plastics in the ocean will soon exceed the total weight of fish. Even more strikingly—it is authoritative, because it came out of a Government press release—every year, the ingestion of plastics by fish and entanglement result in the loss of a million seabirds and 100,000 sea mammals. That is extraordinary. Children have every reason to be very exercised.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Would the right hon. Gentleman agree—it is 25 years this year since I started the environmental organisation, the Socialist Environment and Resources Association—that we consistently have to go right back to the manufacture of plastics? I beg him to meet Professor Steve Evans at the institute for sustainable manufacture at Cambridge University. Changing what we manufacture is at the heart of a long-term resolution.

Sir Vince Cable: I would be delighted to meet the professor, if he is happy to meet me. The hon. Gentleman is right that we are often looking at the wrong end of the process. We should be looking at the origins.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I commend the right hon. Gentleman on his speech thus far. Picking up on that point on manufacturing, will he join me in congratulating Capital Valley Plastics in my constituency? It uses waste plastic as the raw material for its final product. That raw material would otherwise end up in landfill or the oceans.

Sir Vince Cable: The hon. Gentleman is right that that is a constructive response to the problem. If more manufacturers were like his, the economy in plastics would be in a much healthier state. I will come in a moment to some of the reasons why that company is one of the relatively few that are succeeding. It is extremely important none the less.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the packaging manufacturing industry. We have already spoken about manufacturing. Manufacturers take an entirely responsible attitude to plastic; it is people putting plastic in the wrong place that gives rise to the problem. The industry has a target of having zero to landfill by 2030, and has made great steps to get to 78% now. Will the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge the efforts that the industry is making to do the right thing and to avoid waste getting into the wrong place?

Sir Vince Cable: I acknowledge the will of the industry, but there is a lot of bad practice and a lot of products that are unnecessary and are produced in ways that do not help. I fully acknowledge that a lot of manufacturers are responsible, and I am sure they are the people with whom the hon. Gentleman is engaging.

The second direction from which I am approaching this matter is in relation to the global warming controversy, which we have been debating over the weekend. Plastics have a somewhat ambiguous role here. They save on air miles and other forms of transport because they are relatively light materials—I am sure the hon. Gentleman's manufacturers would make that point—but they are also hydrocarbons, so their manufacture and disposal add to global warming gases.

When looking at the material, I found little clarity about the net effect. There is speculation that in 2050, which is the end of our national statutory period for targets, we could have between 15% and 30% of the carbon allowance dedicated to plastic use. I do not know what the answer is. It would be helpful if DEFRA and the Minister commissioned a study, or brought together the studies that have been done, on the impact of plastics on global warming, because the area is ambiguous.

The third reason I secured this debate is that this is the time of year when I, like other colleagues, go to visit other constituencies in the context of local elections. This year I have noticed a particular interest in environmental issues and recycling in local elections. Councils are rightly trying to up their game and avoid the penalties associated with waste disposal.

The situation in my borough brings out some of the dilemmas. It is effective in recycling: it recycles 95% of bottles, cardboard, paper and cans, but it recycles only 50% of plastics. There are some inherent problems, such as food contamination, which clogs up machinery, is very bad for the people who have to do the picking and attracts vermin. Many members of the public do not

[*Sir Vince Cable*]

seem to appreciate that it is difficult to deal with. In the case of many plastics—this goes back to an earlier intervention—the manufacturers do not appear to appreciate that, for technical reasons in the manufacture, their product is non-recyclable. A little example is the devices we use for cleaning fluid: the bottles can be recycled, but the gadgets at the top to squeeze out the fluid cannot. The black plastics used in a lot of carry-out food cannot be recycled. Most people are not aware of that, and there is clearly a major public education task involved. Perhaps the Government should be focusing rather more on that.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): When I have gone around talking to various councils, one thing that has come back—notwithstanding what has been said in the debate—is that there need to be changes to packaging waste regulations. Does the right hon. Gentleman have an idea of what those changes might be? As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) said, it is not about the good manufacturers, but the bad manufacturers and how we deal with them.

Sir Vince Cable: For a start, it would help if we had a properly, clearly defined hierarchy of plastic products. Some are clearly necessary, highly desirable and beneficial, while others are utterly trivial, wasteful and costly to the environment. If that hierarchy was clearly established by scientific inquiry and promoted by Government, that would be helpful to local authorities.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept the simple economic fact that if the cost and price of plastic were higher, less would be consumed and produced? It is therefore incumbent on the Government to introduce a tax system on plastic that differentiates between less recyclable versus more recyclable plastics, bans the worst and taxes the less bad—or taxes them all—so that people move to more cost-effective, sustainable alternatives.

Sir Vince Cable: That is right; it is basic market principles allied to the environment. The Government announced in last year's Budget that they would proceed with that. There is a consultation, which we will no doubt hear more about from the Minister.

Mr Sheerman: Before the right hon. Gentleman moves on from that very good answer to that very good suggestion, may I suggest that real waste experts—people who know about plastics and waste—say, “Make waste valuable and it will be recycled.” If there is no money and no reward for picking it up and recycling it, we are on to a loser. Greta Thunberg wants action now. Can we not make waste valuable quickly?

Sir Vince Cable: That is correct, but with one qualification: it also makes the export of waste valuable. I will come back to the particular problem associated with that in a moment.

In the short time that I have, I will put three specific issues to the Minister. The first concerns data, which has already been raised by the Environmental Audit Committee. There are vast disparities in the numbers that make it very difficult to make sense of what is happening.

To cite a few examples, I think the official figures are that 1.5 million tonnes of plastic waste is generated every year in the UK. The World Wildlife Fund estimates that it is about 5 million tonnes, and Economia, which does consultancy in this area, estimates that it is about 3 million to 4 million tonnes. Perhaps they are using different definitions, but we need clarity, because at the moment there is wild variation.

That also applies to what is being achieved in terms of recycling and waste disposal. I understand that the official figures are that 91% of waste is either recycled or recovered in other ways—the definition of recovery includes incineration and export—and only 9% goes to landfill. However, again, the World Wildlife Fund has wildly different numbers. It suggests that 48% goes to landfill, 20% to 30% is recycled, and 22% is used as an energy source. I do not know why there is that difference. Again, it may be a definitional question, but some clear and unambiguous statement from the Government about the position would be very helpful.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I recently visited Clean Tech in Lincolnshire, which is the largest recycler of PET—polyethylene terephthalate—in the UK. Clean Tech's representatives showed me their bales of plastic, inside which they find such things as bowling balls and car engines. They showed me the bales of plastic in France, and they were clean. They all said that when they go to buy the plastic, they are often outbid, and the plastic is then exported. We need to clean up our plastic, and then ban the export of plastic waste. Clean Tech said that it could recycle every piece of PET in the UK, but not at the moment, because the system is broken. Should we not ban the export of plastic?

Sir Vince Cable: That is exactly the issue that I am getting on to. As it happens, I think I visited the hon. Gentleman's waste plant when I was Secretary of State, so I have some recollection of it. It was a progressive development, but it has the anomalies that he describes.

My second question relates directly to that intervention; it is about the role of exports. We have somewhat flattering statistics that suggest that Britain is meeting, and indeed exceeding, the European waste objective—I believe that 48% is recycled. The definition of recycling does not equate to reprocessing. There are vast differences, and according to the National Audit Office, half of all products that are described as recycled are exported. Quite apart from the question that one might raise about the quality of the treatment in the countries to which such products are exported, there is a serious problem about what we are doing in this country, and in particular how we will respond to the closing of doors in China.

I think China now bans waste imports, and I believe that Malaysia has indicated that it is doing the same. If that is increasingly the pattern in the more developed of the emerging economies in Asia, where will this stuff go? Are we looking for cheap and nasty disposal in Africa, or will it be stocked and dealt with here, and if so, how? To deal with it involves incentives and support for the reprocessing industry—not just recycling, but reprocessing. As the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) pointed out, that requires tax, because at the moment it is unattractive to reprocess. It is much

more profitable to export. There will have to be a tax on the finished plastic products, which will have to be fairly substantial to level the playing field.

I ask the Minister what the Government have analysed the effect of the Chinese border closure to be. What impact will that have on the recycling and reprocessing industries, and how rapid an adjustment will we have to make to the closing of international markets?

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech. Does the issue that he has just raised not bring a wider and more important principle into the debate? Just as with energy production, the Government are beginning to meet targets through interconnectors and looking at importing renewable energy, perhaps from Denmark and elsewhere. Part of the issue is that the Government are potentially meeting recycling targets artificially by exporting goods, when we do not know that they are being recycled in the way that we would like them to be. That is not really in the spirit of addressing our carbon reduction targets as well as I hope that all of us in the Chamber would want.

Sir Vince Cable: The hon. Gentleman is right. I do not think that the Government are necessarily being disingenuous; it just happens to be that the way that recycling is treated has not traditionally distinguished between domestic processing and export. I hope that the Minister will explain how the Government are trying to redress that.

This is a relatively short debate, so I want to give others an opportunity to speak. My final point relates to how we deal with end-use consumption. Two of the Government's consultations are about that, but I think it is useful for Members to express a view at this stage. One obvious area is the plastic bag experience. We had a massive impact—an 88% reduction in demand—as a result of quite a modest 5p charge on bags. However, at the moment it is restricted to firms with more than 250 employees. I understand the reasoning; the Government do not want to expand the regulation to single-handed shopkeepers. However, there is surely a number in between—say five employees and above—that would be much more realistic and have a significant impact.

The second potential action, which the Government again are consulting on, is introducing deposits for bottles. One of the reasons the German experience in this area is so much better than the British experience is that the Germans have, in effect, a 20p tax on plastic bottles, which can be refunded, giving people a strong incentive to reuse as well as recycle.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): As kids, we used to collect bottles. Bellshill Nisa in my area collects plastic bottles and refunds money to charities. Perhaps the Minister could take that up. Kids could pick up plastic bottles, take them back to the local shop and receive money for them.

Sir Vince Cable: I am sure that the Minister will have an answer to that, since the Government are consulting at the moment. There is a whole variety of creative initiatives one could explore, such as installing water fountains or just encouraging people to fill their bottles with tap water, but it requires a change of culture as well as an economic levy.

In considering the issues, the Government have a following wind in public opinion. A very good survey by YouGov last week suggested that about 80% of the public are comfortable with the idea of an extra charge on plastic bottles, around 70% are comfortable with the idea of extending the plastic bag tax, and a large majority are willing to pay something like £2 a week more on £100-worth of groceries. For many hard-pressed households, that is not an inconsiderable sum, and one has to be sensitive to issues of family poverty. However, the majority of public opinion seems to be reconciled to the idea that to reduce plastic usage, there will have to be additional charges.

In conclusion, let me point out that the Government have a rather modest long-term objective of working towards eliminating unnecessary plastic use—I think that is the phrase they use—by 2042. In that year, I will be waiting for my 100th birthday card from Buckingham Palace. I suggest that if that objective were brought forward to, say, 2025, we would be dealing with a more realistic timescale. I look forward to hearing what colleagues have to say.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Three Back Benchers want to speak and there are three Front Benchers to respond, so I would be very grateful if the Back-Bench speakers stuck to four to five minutes each. I call Bill Grant.

6.50 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for securing this important debate.

As an individual, I welcome the fact that the Government have already banned plastic microbeads in personal care and cosmetic products. Previously, each time someone showered with such products, tens of thousands of microbeads began their tortuous journey into our oceans, putting our marine life at risk. I also welcome the 5p charge that we have introduced for single-use plastic bags, which has reduced their use by approximately 88%, and the deposit return scheme that the Government propose for drink bottles. Such a scheme is not a novel concept for those who, like me, are of a certain vintage. I recall earlier schemes for glass, for bottles of milk, soft drinks or beer, and for jam jars—some hon. Members present may recognise the term “jeelie jars”—which had a value at the Co-operative.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) made the very good point that giving waste a value helps to reduce or recycle it. That theory stands up well. It is particularly encouraging that plastic bottles of mineral water are no longer on sale here in Parliament and that, to my surprise, the House recently introduced a 25p surcharge for disposable coffee cups. Being a Scots fellow—this may apply to those from Yorkshire as well—I paid it just the once and will not be paying it again, so the system works. Both measures are very sound.

The Chancellor spoke in his spring statement about the Government's commitment to help to protect critical habitats, including by supporting the Ascension Island Council's call to designate some of its waters as a marine

[*Bill Grant*]

protected area, having proposed in the 2018 Budget a new tax on the manufacture or import of plastic packaging of less than 30% recyclable material. As in many cases, however, there is a negative side. A recent article on marine conservation by Eleanor Church highlighted the “plastic soup” of waste in the north Pacific vortex, which potentially covers an immense 1.6 million sq km and weighs an estimated 80,000 metric tonnes, which is unimaginable—it is certainly beyond my imagination. Who done it? We done it.

Mr Sheerman: I am really enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s speech. I understand that a Scottish university—I think it is Edinburgh, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman can enlighten me—is doing some really interesting research into the possibility of solar-powered autonomous vehicles patrolling the seas and oceans, sucking up the plastic, chipping it and taking it to the nearest port for recycling. I really think that that is part of the future.

Bill Grant: Like the hon. Gentleman, I am not sure which Scottish university is doing that research, but I think it may be Edinburgh. Although it has not been proven, that is an innovative idea for recovering what we have polluted our oceans with, and I certainly hope that the researchers make progress with it. I wish them well and hope that the UK Government or the Scottish Government will encourage such research, because we really need it to work and materialise.

Regrettably, I understand that a vortex also exists in the north Atlantic. Such vortexes of waste are a shame on our society and on western society, because we are responsible for that pollution. Like the hon. Member for Huddersfield, I hope we can find a way to remove it, because it is a threat to marine life and to the humans who ply and fish the waters affected.

We need to seriously address our throwaway approach to life and our frequently irrational desire to cosset our purchases in excessive packaging that may not be entirely recyclable if it is composed of polymers, particularly given how much plastic waste we produce here in the United Kingdom. Even going by the middle figure, we produce a phenomenal amount: approximately 3.7 million tonnes annually. Nevertheless, by signing up in December 2017 to the UN resolution on marine litter and microplastics, the UK Government have taken a step, albeit a small one, in the correct direction, with the aim of further combating marine litter. I also applaud the Scottish Government for publishing a strategy and a plan to address marine litter.

It is worthy of note that retailers in the United Kingdom—I nearly said “Every little helps”—are attempting to do their bit for the environment. I understand that Waitrose has pledged to stop using black plastic trays by the end of this year. That is to be welcomed, as is the fact that other retailers have indicated that they will follow suit, thereby reducing the volume of such material that, regrettably, ends up in landfill.

In looking forward, we must reflect on past generations, who rarely bought pre-packaged goods. They coped with a minimalist approach, often relying on greaseproof paper or paper bags to take home the essentials; I am sure that in those days the paper would have ended up as fuel for the home fire. Similarly, the “make do and

mend” ethos that was applied to natural fabrics in bygone eras needs to be applied again, where possible, and we need to consider carefully our constant use of synthetic textiles with the potential to shed polluting microfibres.

I note that the UK Government are hopeful that their resources and waste strategy will lead to significant improvements, including by ending confusion over recycling. We have to make recycling simpler; I note that the Ayrshire councils make a great effort to provide receptacles, but as a nation we do not seem able to select the correct one.

Mr Sheerman: People have put forward some very simplistic solutions, such as not exporting waste any more, but does the hon. Gentleman accept the view from the industry that if we stopped exporting waste, especially for reprocessing in Europe, our country would be full of plastic? We would be up to our necks in it. Much of our reprocessing takes place in Europe, and if we come out of the European Union, those exports will be banned.

Bill Grant: The hon. Gentleman makes his point very clearly, but my answer is that as a nation we have to learn to reduce our use of plastic. Let us not produce so much in the first place—and if we do produce it, it should have to be recyclable. It was mentioned earlier that China is no longer accepting waste imports, but why should we burden other nations with our waste? Let us reduce our waste and live under a managed waste system that we can cope with, without burdening other nations. We also need to make the polluter pay and generally reform the packaging producer responsibility system.

It will be interesting in due course to digest the response to the Government’s call for evidence and the findings that emanate from the recent consultations. I know that lately the Minister and the Department have taken greater steps on environmental matters than ever before, but I would be delighted to see a special focus on plastic waste. In the meantime, can the Minister confirm what support, if any, the Government are providing for the various plastic initiatives such as the waste and resources action plan, the plastics industry recycling action plan and the UK circular plastics network? We have done a great deal, but there is no doubt that a great deal more needs to be done to reduce the dependency of this nation and others on plastic.

6.57 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this timely debate—it is just a shame that so few hon. Members are present.

The plastics debate has been illuminated to us recently in the media, not least by Sir David Attenborough, and having Greta Thunberg among us in Parliament today has brought it very much to the fore. The reality is that plastic production and use continue to rise across the UK; according to the statistics I have, it rises by about 4% each year, but we know that the data need to be more reliable. Of course, we also send much of our waste—the things we do not want to deal with—overseas for others to deal with, which is clearly not acceptable.

This year, I took part in the Tearfund plastic challenge for Lent, which brought plastic into sharp focus for me. I thought that not purchasing any plastic for 40 days and 40 nights was a good idea when I signed up, but the plastic fast hit me on my first trip to the supermarket: everywhere I turned, plastic stared back at me. I was incensed. Had I been blind to the scale of the plastic virus until now? Having previously been frustrated by how much plastic I had seen, I was now angry. As a consumer, I was given no choice but to walk out of the supermarket and rethink my life. Try it—I recommend it.

My first respite was York's Shambles Market. Here I could buy fruit and veg and put them straight into my cloth bag for life. Other outlets in York, such as Alligator and Bishy Weigh, where customers fill their recycled pots with grains and groceries, provide an alternative to the plastic wrapping used by all the supermarkets.

My diet has changed—for the better, I have to say; it is now plant based. I bake my own bread and make my own coleslaw, but I have gone without some products as a result of wanting to source them plastic-free. Dairy is hard to source, and there are others. As a consumer, my choices were removed. If I have experienced that, people across the country are experiencing it today and there is therefore an obligation on us all to address the plastic challenge.

Mr Sheerman: Does my hon. Friend agree that, having heard Greta Thunberg speak today, it is time we took power back for the consumer? Would she join me in taking all our plastic from Marks and Spencer's or Tesco's back and dumping it in front of their stores, saying, "Look after that"? Is that not the sort of direct action that that young girl from Sweden is urging us to take?

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. Absolutely—if we cannot see movement on the problem of plastics, we must move plastics to the places where they will make others move. I trust that we will take another step forward on the issue as a result of today's debate.

The plastics strategy must set tough targets for producers and manufacturers to provide alternatives. Research is under way, as I found out recently when I met Nestlé, a major manufacturer in York. I also spoke to local businesses, and it is clear that they are frustrated too. We have heard the Government trying to bring redress item by item—whether on bags, bottles or straws—but the reality is that we need to get to the top of the supply chain and look at what is happening.

In York, the council has really failed the people of my city. Plastics, apart from bottles, are not picked up at the kerbside, and therefore end up in landfill. This weekend, as I was doing my plastic walkabout, I was horrified to learn that much of York's recyclable waste ends up in landfill, not even going where residents believe it is going. That is not good enough. Unless the Minister sets really tough targets in her plastics strategy, it is clear that the Government will have failed. Labour in York has pledged to put in a water fountain system so that people can refill their bottles in the city and turn around the council's current abject failure to take the matter seriously.

I was impressed when I visited York's Biorenewables Development Centre, which uses high-pressure steam and autoclaving to separate household waste, drawing

out plastics from other waste to be able to deal with them. I was also impressed by nine-year-old Mollie Nicholl, who came to my surgery to teach me about ecobricks. She brought her empty plastic bottles, plastic wrappers and a wooden spoon, and showed me how to fill the bottle with the wrappers and then screw on the top, making an ecobrick, which would then be collected and made into either garden furniture or play equipment—new plastic capturing. She is York's plastic eco warrior.

York's climate strikers are incensed by plastic around them, as I found out when I met them recently. We owe it to all in our communities to take action, so I have five things I want to ask the Minister. Will she expand the role of the Grocery Code Adjudicator to take on the policing of cutting carbon and plastic from production and manufacturing in the supply chain? That seems an appropriate place to do it. Will she set stringent plastic targets, so that organic-based packaging rather than polymers are at the forefront, and polymers are phased out by 2025? Will the UK contribute to the plastic clear-up operations in the oceans, which we know has begun here at home? Will she champion ecobricks, as Mollie in my constituency has, and other forms of reuse for plastic, during the transition phase? Finally, will she set tough targets on recycling for local authorities and support them in driving change?

Our planet is breaking under the consumption-obsessed society we live in. As we have been elected to this place, we have been given a platform to radically change our world. Will the Minister use her power, as Labour will, to transform the local, national and global conversation and action, by being drastic on plastic?

7.4 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I will be brief, Mr Hosie. We know that Extinction Rebellion are protesting outside, and I completely condone that. We know that by 2050 there will be as much plastic as fish in the sea. We know the fossil fuel manufacturers are given near trillion-dollar subsidies, and to a certain extent are diverting that money into plastic, because 80% of fossil fuels cannot be exploited. We know the only way to reduce the consumption of plastic is to raise its price. The way to do that is to tax plastic and to have cleaner, more homogenous plastic, which is more cost-effective to recycle.

The Government have paid lip service to a plastics tax—I welcome the comments from the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable)—but they will not bring it in until 2022. We need to be robust, assertive and immediate. On the timeframe for universal recyclability of plastic, we are looking at 2042, and in Europe, it is 2030. It should be 2025.

The producer responsibility obligations system is not working. I would welcome a deposit scheme. We clearly need taxes on bottles, and refill schemes in local shops, so that people can refill their bottle. People ask, "What can I do?" and throw away the bottles because they are so cheap. If we taxed them, we would be in a better situation.

There is emerging technology, such as gasification, that enables plastics to be broken down to produce energy in a way that does not impact on climate change. We should be investing in research and development. We should be putting more pressure on supermarkets. I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for

[Geraint Davies]

Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who says that people should be encouraged to take their plastic and dump it back on the supermarkets. They would respond. It is all very well people being apologists for the supermarkets and saying that they are doing as much as they can; they pretend to do more than they do. They need to do much more. We cannot continue to export all our plastics, and sweep the problem under the table. We need to take action immediately.

By the time we have the tax that is proposed by the Government, an extra 70,000 tonnes of plastic will have been deposited. That is why I tabled my Plastics Bill, which would set out a fiscal strategy, and introduce a plastics agency and a global target for the overall amount of plastic, in which Britain's amount reduced over time. It would also give our nations an imperative to make sure that target was delivered.

7.7 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important and topical debate. I start by telling hon. Members that I went into Waverley station with an empty cup of coffee to get rid of. The girl said to me, "You can take that back to where you got it," because there were no bins there, but that was not going to work, as I bought it in King's Cross in London, so I just handed it to Costa.

For those of us who were born in the '50s, plastics have gone from being space-age wonder materials to underpinning modern life. Plastic pipes, containers and container liners provide hygienic and durable ways to transport water, foodstuffs and medicines.

If the whole lifecycle of the product is taken into account, plastics can be better for the environment, if they are recycled or otherwise disposed of safely. Lightweight, durable containers cut down on transport costs and reduce waste. The shelf life of perishable goods and products can be greatly extended with plastic packaging. Bagged bananas have a shelf life of 36 days, compared with 15 days if sold loose. A cucumber that lasts three days unpackaged will last two weeks if covered in plastic. Around 10 million tonnes of food is wasted in the UK annually, and that is associated with 22 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, but 70% of that waste is absolutely avoidable. Plastic components weigh less and can last longer than non-plastic alternatives, and using plastic components where possible has allowed vehicle and aircraft manufacturers to reduce vehicle weight and improve efficiency.

Six per cent. of global oil production is used to manufacture plastic, but that is projected to rise to 20% by 2050, increasing its share of the global annual carbon budget from 1% to 15%. In 2012, plastic manufacture accounted for approximately 390 million tonnes of carbon monoxide emissions. The potent greenhouse gases methane and ethylene are released by most common plastics as they degrade. The durability of plastics and their resilience to biodegradation is a double-edged sword. It is key to their usefulness to us, but ecologically lethal.

Some 70% of the litter in the sea is plastic. Plastics fragment as they degrade and are a danger to all animals of all sizes, and they threaten our whole food chain.

Large pieces can entangle or choke animals and birds. Seabirds collect fragments of fishing gear when they build their nests. Strangled birds hanging from cliff sides are an ever more familiar sight in Scottish seabird colonies. Smaller fragments can be mistaken for food items and eaten, causing marine creatures and the animals feeding on them to starve while their stomachs are full. Some plastic products release chemicals as they degrade. Plastics can also absorb and later release persistent pollutants. The risk those microplastics pose to humans is absolutely unknown. A littered environment reduces human quality of life and deters visitors.

As has been mentioned, China and the rest of south-east Asia are no longer willing to be a dump for the world's dirty plastic. In January 2018, the Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am a member, heard that the Chinese decision to ban the importing of heavily contaminated plastic and paper waste reduced such waste exports from the UK to China by 40%. This caused a crisis in the UK recycling industry. The Chinese gave ample warning of their intent to restrict these waste types. The ban itself was announced by the Chinese Government in July 2017, but warnings of an impending crisis came from the British Plastics Federation as early as 2012. Furthermore, the Chinese Government have been cracking down on heavily contaminated recycling entering the country via a succession of programmes since 2006.

The EAC heard last January that the UK Government had their head in the sand. I asked witnesses from trade associations and professional bodies whether the UK Government had been pressed hard enough for action. Their view was that the Government were interested in meeting them and monitoring the situation, but would not act to help. Indeed, those trade bodies had seen more engagement with industry from the devolved Administrations.

The UN's climate experts tell us that we have only 11 years left to avert a total climate catastrophe. Transitioning to a simpler economy is an urgent and essential task, and waste management is an essential part of that. Has the Minister had any discussions on harmonised traffic-light labelling systems—matching product-to-bin systems—across devolved Administrations, local authorities and even industries? Having visited the Coca-Cola plant in East Kilbride, I know that it is very keen on having a harmonised product-to-bin system.

As has been mentioned, public awareness has never been higher. "The Blue Planet" and David Attenborough's latest calls to arms against climate change, "Climate Change—The Facts" on BBC 1 and "Our Planet" on Netflix, are must-watches for everybody. Scotland was the first part of the UK to commit to introducing a deposit return scheme for drinks containers. The Scottish Government are open to co-designing the scheme with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, being mindful that nothing happens in isolation. I believe the UK Environment Secretary, the Minister and the devolved Administrations met at a summit on this matter, and the principles—as far as I know—were agreed in July. The Scottish Government support the EU's targets for all packaging to be easily recyclable or reusable by 2030. They are a founding member of the Plastics Pact, which aims to deliver that target sooner and press the UK Government to commit to maintaining the current protections and standards on plastic packaging.

In January, *The Guardian* and Greenpeace revealed that the UK Government spent months behind the scenes opposing the EU's target to recycle 66% of urban waste by 2035. That is behind the Scottish Government's target of 70% by 2025, and throws into doubt the UK Government's pledge to develop ambitious new future targets and milestones, especially since—as far as I know—DEFRA has been singled out as the Department least well prepared for the UK's departure from the EU. That does not fill me with reassurance.

7.14 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important and detailed debate. He was absolutely right to say that recycling and pollution are not necessarily linked. Indeed, climate change and pollution are not necessarily linked. We need to deal with both: we need to ensure that recycling is there to deal with the climate change impact of plastics, but also that we are preventing pollution.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who made interventions, all of which were helpful in this particular case. I thank the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), who is absolutely right to mention that we had extensive deposit schemes in the past. In fact, I can remember the first time I ever got involved in any sort of political campaigning, when I was at school: we tried to persuade Corona not to stop using a deposit scheme for its bottles. It did stop, and went out of business—we can put two and two together. Most bottles are actually recycled in Germany, precisely because they still keep deposit return schemes.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned the incredible level of self-restraint that she has shown over the past 40 days and 40 nights. I do not believe it is possible or reasonable to expect the majority of our population to make that sort of choice. We need to make it more convenient for people to go plastic-free.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) outlined the importance of making reduction, reuse and recycling more financially viable than just making things and chucking them away. The hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) was right to point out that some applications of plastic are correct, but a lot are not. Where we use plastic, we must ensure that it is not just claimed to be recyclable, but is actually recycled. The convenience of plastic makes it the fastest-growing waste material, but its use is not always appropriate. Most plastic items have a limited lifespan and cannot be reused. However the most-used plastics, such as PET and HDPE, are readily recyclable, and the main difficulty is getting them from the point of use to the point of recycling.

Councils have been successful in establishing recycling infrastructure and services: 99% of local authorities in the UK currently collect plastic bottles, and 77% collect pots, tubs and trays in kerbside recycling. However, all of that costs money, and if we are going to increase our recycling rate at all we will need the people who do the work—the collection authorities, the disposal authorities and the recycling plant—to be economically viable. In the future, and I hope sooner rather than later, there

needs to be a mechanism for ensuring that the producers of the plastics pay for them to be recycled. For bottles, that may well be best done by a deposit return scheme, as in Germany. We welcome the Government's commitment to investigating deposit return schemes and to the principle of extended producer responsibility.

The requisite sense of urgency in the Government's resources and waste strategy appears to be lacking. Recycling in this country has flatlined. Between 2000 and 2010, under the last Labour Government, household recycling increased by 235%. However, after years of austerity, local government, which is responsible for waste and recycling, has been left underfunded and understaffed. While Labour-run Wales has accelerated ahead, achieving a national recycling rate of approximately 63%, England has flatlined at around 44% since 2011, and is set to miss Europe-wide targets of 50% by 2020.

It will take time to introduce an effective producer-pays system. In the meantime, our local authorities need the capital investment and revenue to maintain their recycling collections, let alone improve them. Local authorities currently have an £8 billion funding gap; unless that is filled, it is unrealistic to expect them to do anything additional.

The right hon. Member for Twickenham is right to say that there is high public interest in recycling, particularly plastics, and a greater awareness of where our waste ends up, in part down to "Blue Planet" and other programmes. Since China started to refuse the UK's poor quality recyclables and waste in 2018, the UK has been exporting waste to countries with some of the highest levels of ocean plastic pollution. Some south-east Asian counties are also moving towards a ban.

We need to encourage the UK to be more responsible for our waste closer to home, and to recycle in the UK—not export our waste. We need to take the opportunity of the current political support to drive a green transformation into an efficient and productive green economy with new, green jobs. We need to clean up our natural environment and halt the flow of plastic and other waste into our oceans. It is time to put actions behind the national waste strategy for England. It is time to show Government leadership.

7.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important debate on plastics recycling. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on being the only Member to intervene and stay to listen to the response. I am conscious that most of this issue is devolved, but I am aware of his passion for ensuring that there are improvements.

I welcome the other contributions to this important debate. A number of hon. Members highlighted that this is not a dilemma. We need less plastic waste, but we must recognise the benefits that plastic can bring in improving the environment, such as by lowering carbon and reducing the use of other common materials, including paper and glass. As the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) pointed out, the use of some plastic can reduce food waste. In other cases, it is not always necessary to use plastic. The hon. Member for York

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

Central (Rachael Maskell) said she felt terribly frustrated when she went shopping. The Government have encouraged plastic-free aisles, and she will see that more and more supermarkets are making it more straightforward for people not to have to pick up a plastic bag, although for many consumers that is still convenient.

On the resources and waste strategy, to which hon. Members have referred, the Government are clear that we want to move towards a circular economy, in which raw materials are used efficiently and waste is minimised, so we have set high recycling ambitions. I am very conscious that, as the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) said, the amount of recycling has not increased greatly in the past few years. It has somewhat plateaued, although it has continued to increase in England.

Wales is leading the way, and Northern Ireland has made a big improvement, driven by its collection of food waste. England is third of the nations, and Scotland is fourth. I will not say that it is last, because that would be a bit insulting; I know how ambitious it is. Nevertheless, the nations continue to learn from each other. We continue to collaborate, and are consulting together on what we are doing about things such as the producer responsibility schemes, because we believe that there is a good reason to try to have a consistent approach across the UK, especially considering that, once we leave the European Union, this will certainly become a devolved matter. I am pleased that the Governments of the four nations have recognised why it would be sensible to collaborate in that regard.

We are setting a 65% municipal recycling rate by 2035 and a minimum 70% recycling rate for packaging waste by 2030. It is our intention that, by 2025, all plastic packaging placed on the market will be recyclable, reusable or compostable, and we want to eliminate avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042. A number of uses of plastic are well considered. In particular, a lot of single-use plastic gets used in the NHS, and it would not necessarily be appropriate to want to get away from that. Nevertheless, there are ways in which we can manage it at the end of its life so it is more environmentally beneficial.

Geraint Davies *rose—*

Dr Coffey: I will take an intervention, but I have little time to respond to the points that have already been made.

Geraint Davies: Some people can recall a world in which we could go into supermarkets and buy meat and other products without plastic, such as in tins. Does the Minister accept that it is possible to envision such a world? If we tax things, we can move towards it more quickly. I obviously accept that some plastics are necessary, but all should be recycled more quickly.

Dr Coffey: Well, perhaps, but the hon. Gentleman should be aware that emissions would be generated because heavier goods would be transported around the country—around the world, in fact. That is why we need a balanced approach. This is not solely about plastic. The hon. Gentleman wants us to move back to just using paper bags and glass products, but that would be worse for carbon, so we need a balanced approach.

The important thing is to have a lifecycle approach that considers the production, consumption and end of life of the plastics that are placed on the market.

At the production stage, plastics should be designed to be easily reusable or recyclable. As it stands today, all plastic is technically recyclable. It is just that the economics do not necessarily encourage that, and sometimes the amount of contamination prevents that. At the consumption stage, we want consumers to be encouraged to use more reusable items. They should be able to identify easily how plastics should be recycled. At the end-of-life stage, more plastics should be reused, repaired or recycled.

As has been said, there are many benefits to plastic, which does not decompose and can last centuries. However, it can end up as litter in the natural environment, and there are concerns about the fact that litter on land often ends up in the oceans. There are problems with the pollution that can arise from plastics, so we want to prevent plastic waste from occurring in the first place, as well as managing it better when it does. Our strategy sets out how we intend to do that through a more sustainable use of resources to ensure we waste less and reuse, recycle and repair more. Moving away from a “take, make, use and throw” approach, and creating a circular model for plastics, means that the environment, the economy and society will all benefit.

As I have already said, one of the keys to this is design. The Government are currently consulting on extending producer responsibility for packaging. That is a powerful policy approach in which a producer’s responsibility for the product it places on the market extends to the post-use stage. Producers will pay the full net cost of managing packaging waste. The differentiation in the levy will incentivise products that are easier to reuse or recycle. As announced in the Budget last year, the Government are consulting on the introduction of a specific tax on plastic packaging with less than 30% recycled plastic content to stimulate demand for recycled plastic. That should encourage manufacturers to produce more sustainable packaging and will create demand for more recycled material.

The two schemes will work together coherently to improve recycling rates, and the revenue collected from these measures will enable investment in further action to address the issues surrounding single-use plastics, waste and litter, and help improve the waste system in the UK. We are working closely with the industry, businesses and consumers to ensure their views are taken forward in new schemes that may affect them. We are supporting businesses that are already taking on the challenge of reducing plastic waste and improving recycling.

The right hon. Member for Twickenham referred to the carrier bag charge. He will be aware that, in our consultation, we are discussing extending it to all retailers and increasing the charge. The deposit return scheme is a big challenge for our country. It is easy to imagine what could happen at the front end. We are consulting on two potential options relating to what people tend to consume on the go, as opposed to all plastic bottles and cans.

The back end of the system is more complicated. I have been on a learning journey to different countries in the European Union to look at how we might do that. We are consulting on that. The hon. Member for Falkirk is right to say that Scotland is taking steps forward in

that regard, and we are in discussion with it. We are also looking at how we can provide a new product labelling scheme, such as eco-labels, to help consumers make better decisions. We would like to see greater consistency of labelling so consumers know what they can recycle.

On households, we are not alone in the European Union in having kerbside collections, but we want to ensure that there is greater consistency in what councils collect—not necessarily how they collect it, but what they collect. We are having a further consultation on that at the moment, and are introducing separate food waste collections, which will improve recycling rates and, if they are treated appropriately, should be a better way of reducing carbon emissions. By creating a reliable, vibrant market, with Government support through the levies that will be introduced in the extended producer responsibility system, we should be able to support councils in making that innovation change.

Innovation by industry will continue to be necessary. We have helped by pledging £20 million to the plastics research and innovation fund, and a further £20 million to the plastics and waste investment fund. Those funds are aimed at encouraging innovation to boost recycling and reduce littering. Through the industrial strategy challenge fund, we are investing up to £66 million towards the development of smart, sustainable plastic packaging. We also support WRAP, which was asked about earlier, and the UK Plastics Pact, which bring together businesses across the entire plastics value chain to make the necessary improvements.

The Government have set ambitious targets. It is important that we work with consumers and industry to reduce plastic waste. Our strategy considers the whole lifecycle of plastics. In that regard, I believe that once we get through this consultation and introduce the necessary measures in the Environment Bill, where we do not have powers already, we can really work together to tackle this plastics challenge.

7.29 pm

Sir Vince Cable: I do not have a great deal to add in the last 30 seconds. We all understand the chemistry, and the technology is given. The Government's objectives are very clear, and there is a great deal of consensus around them. The main area of disagreement is about the urgency and pace at which this is being done. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) has a Bill to introduce a foreshortened timetable for dealing with unnecessary waste. I very much hope that through that or the Government's action, we will speed up the measures that we all agree need to be taken.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 24 April 2019

[MRS MADELEINE MOON *in the Chair*]

Russian Annexation of Crimea

9.30 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Russian annexation of Crimea.

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

It was a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, however briefly, and it is a great pleasure to serve under yours, Mr Davies. 18 March 2019 was the fifth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea. It is worth stopping at this point to dwell on the fact that Russia has been allowed to annex Crimea for five years, to carry out military activities in the Donbass, and also to invade two enclaves of Georgia. As I said in my speech in this Chamber in July last year,

"we are dealing with a serial offender."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 102WH.]

I will first detail what happened five years ago, move on to the impact of the illegal annexation, then finally examine the current situation in the Azov sea.

On 20 February 2014, Russia's "little green men"—military without insignia—started the occupation of the Crimean peninsula. That began the process of annexation, as soldiers wearing Russian combat fatigues and carrying Russian weapons began seizing important institutions in the peninsula. Russia initially denied that those were Russian soldiers, but later said that they were. As a result of that annexation, a range of sanctions was imposed on Russia by the EU, the US and allies, including economic sanctions such as restrictions on access to financial markets; an arms embargo; restrictions on the export of oil extraction technology; targeted sanctions against certain individuals; and diplomatic sanctions, including exclusion from the G8 and the suspension of voting rights in the Council of Europe. I will return to that last point towards the end of my speech.

The Foreign Secretary has said:

"I condemn the illegal annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol...five years ago. The UK will never recognise Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and we call on Russia to end their illegitimate control of the peninsula and their attempts to redraw the boundaries of Europe."

Ambassador Jonathan Allen, who was the UK deputy permanent representative to the UN, has said:

"Russia's aggression towards Ukraine is not limited to the Donbas and Crimea—Russia seeks to undermine Ukraine at every opportunity...supplying the Russian-backed separatists with weapons and calling illegitimate elections—all in breach of the Minsk agreement.

Only this year, in a written answer in the other place, Lord Ahmad said:

"Sanctions imposed alongside our international partners, including the US, in 2014 have had a coordinated impact on Russia by increasing economic pressure to change its Ukraine policy and

sending a clear, united message that Russian aggression in Ukraine will not be tolerated. This impact has been strengthened by the continuation and maintenance of 2014 sanctions since their implementation."

There has been widespread condemnation by the UK of Russia's activities, and it is good to see that strong line continuing.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend on the beginning of his speech, which is superb. Does he agree that part of the problem with Russian aggression, and the boldness with which Russia has acted in Ukraine, has been the lack of a proper and effective response when Russia moved into South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia?

John Howell: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Many reasons have been given as to why Russia annexed Crimea, one of which is that keeping Ukraine at war prevents it from joining NATO. That goes beyond being a conspiracy theory; it is something we ought to recognise.

On 16 March 2014, Russia organised a sham referendum in Crimea. That referendum was followed on 18 March 2014 by the so-called agreement on the accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation. Voters were not given the chance to choose the status quo in that referendum, which was conducted in polling stations under armed guard. That violated Ukraine's constitution and international law. It is claimed that 97% voted to join Russia, and according to Russian official results, that was on a turnout of 87%. However, it is interesting that later, a member of the Russian human rights council mistakenly posted the real election results, showing that only 55% had voted to join Russia on a turnout of 40%—a very significant difference.

The UN General Assembly produced two resolutions; I understand that we co-sponsored one. Those resolutions called on states and international organisations not to recognise any change in Crimea's status, and affirmed the commitment of the United Nations to recognise Crimea as part of Ukraine. The referendum also violated, among other agreements, the 1994 Budapest memorandum on security assurances for Ukraine. Under that agreement, Ukraine gave up the nuclear weapons that were on its territory in exchange for independence and undertakings given by Russia.

There is no precise data on what effect the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia has had, but a quick calculation shows that Ukraine has been robbed of the following assets: 3.6% of GDP; 4,000 enterprises; 10% of port infrastructure; 80% of oil and gas deposits; and 70% of potential natural gas deposits in the Black sea.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): My hon. Friend is painting a very bleak picture, but in his introduction, he mentioned sanctions applied to Russia by the United States, the European Union and other allies. Do we have any measure of how effective those sanctions have been?

John Howell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Interestingly, in the other place, Lord Ahmad said that those sanctions had been very good at sending a clear and united message that Russian aggression in Ukraine would not be tolerated. However, I am not sure that they have had that much effect in practice: for example,

[John Howell]

Russia has been able to get round the arms embargo. The only sanction that has had some impact on the state of Russia has been the measure to deprive it of access to the financial markets in London and elsewhere.

I will now examine the impact on Ukraine of the annexation of Crimea, and will first deal with the illegal imposition of Russian law. Contrary to its obligations as an occupying power under the fourth Geneva convention, Russia has imposed its legislation in the occupied territory of Crimea. What is extremely dangerous is that Russian laws have been applied retroactively to acts and events that took place in Crimea prior to its occupation. This is not a dry legal debate; it has severe implications for the people of Crimea. For example, the policy of automatic naturalisation means that all Ukrainian citizens who remained in the occupied territory have had Russian citizenship forcibly imposed on them, which is a big change for them. Moreover, Russia's occupation and purported annexation of Crimea complicated the question of citizenship for children born after February 2014, since it is difficult for parents to register a child as a citizen with the Ukrainian authorities. Eight campaigns conscripting Crimean residents into the Russian Federation armed forces have been held since the beginning of the occupation. During the latest campaign, which ended in December 2018, approximately 2,800 men from Crimea were enlisted, bringing the overall number of Crimean conscripts to almost 15,000. As draft evasion is punishable under Russian criminal law by up to two years in prison, Crimean citizens are de facto forced to enter the Russian armed forces.

The atmosphere of fear, intimidation and physical and psychological pressure has forced 35,000 to 40,000 Ukrainian citizens, including an enormous number of Crimean Tatars, to leave Crimea and settle in other areas of Ukraine. The 2018 human rights report by the US Department of State states that the actual number could be as high as 100,000, as many remained unregistered. To replace those who left the peninsula, up to 1 million Russians have been brought in from Russia and resettled in Crimea.

Religious freedom has also been compromised, with 38 parishes administered by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine closing down in the occupied Crimea. Eight parishes of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine remain on the peninsula, but they have been constantly targeted by the occupying authorities since Russia seized control. It is not just individual churches that are affected. Russia has launched legal proceedings to seize the land where the only Orthodox Church of Ukraine cathedral in Crimea is located. Mosques and the Jewish community have been targeted, too. In March 2014, Reform Rabbi Mikhail Kapustin of Simferopol was forced to leave Crimea after denouncing Russian actions. His synagogue had been defaced by a swastika and, a month later, vandals defaced Sevastopol's monument to 4,200 Jews killed by the Nazis in July 1942.

Russia has set out systematically to eliminate Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian languages and culture. No schools are now left in Crimea with a curriculum entirely in Ukrainian and Crimean languages. Contrary to the 2017 order of the International Court of Justice, which requests that Russia ensure the availability of education

in the Ukrainian language, the number of children studying in Ukrainian has decreased from 14,000 in 2013-14 to 172 in the 2017-18 school year.

Russia has banned the highest representative body of Crimean Tatars—the Mejlis—under false allegations of extremist activity. Despite the clear meaning of the 2017 International Court of Justice order to

“refrain, pending the final decision in the case, from maintaining or imposing limitations on the ability of the Crimean Tatar community to conserve its representative institutions”,

two years have passed and Russia continues to maintain its ban. Members of the indigenous Crimean Tatar minority, many of whom vocally oppose the Russian occupation, have faced particularly acute repression by the authorities. In 2018, 367 infringements of the right to a fair trial were registered. More than 90 people, mostly Crimean Tatars, have been detained and/or sentenced under politically motivated charges, with some being transferred into Russia across an internationally recognised border. In detention centres, they are being mistreated and tortured as punishment or to extort confessions.

On 12 December 2018, Russia detained the amputee Crimean Tatar, Edem Bekirov. He has diabetes and four shunts in his heart. Since then, he has been denied urgently needed medical care. He now has an infection in the open wound where his leg was amputated. He is not allowed to go outdoors. His blood sugar level and blood pressure have gone up. He sleeps in a sitting position. The Russian FSB rejects his alibi in favour of a secret witness. Recently his detention was extended until June.

From 2014 to 30 June 2018, 42 people were victims of enforced disappearances, including 27 ethnic Ukrainians and nine Crimean Tatars. It is believed that Russian security forces kidnapped individuals for opposing Russia's occupation to instil fear in the population and prevent dissent. The Russian occupation continues to deny access to international human rights monitors to Crimea—access that is in line with United Nations resolutions.

Ukrainian cultural heritage is also under threat. One very big world heritage landmark and four landmarks submitted for consideration to UNESCO are located in the occupied territory. Having illegally announced the right of ownership for 32 historical buildings of the Khan's Palace array, the Russian occupying power has undertaken an unprofessional and incompetent reconstruction. That may seem insignificant in comparison with the life of the individual suffering from diabetes, but it has a personal association for me, as I was an archaeologist before I came into the House and it is sad to see such things happening. The removing of valuable cultural artefacts from Crimean museums to Russia continues.

That is as nothing compared with the Russian militarisation of the peninsula, which has continued at pace. Russia has substantially reinforced and modernised its Crimean military land, air and naval components. The militarisation of Crimea is a threat not only to Ukraine, but to the security of the whole of Europe. At any moment Russia can provoke a military conflict in the Black sea region with NATO.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Change UK): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is a fellow member of the Council of Europe delegation. I have been to Ukraine three times in the past few weeks

to monitor the election process, and I was privileged to witness the peaceful transfer of power on Sunday. In many ways and to most people's minds, it was a rather unexpected democratic change in Ukraine. Does he agree that that is something to celebrate? There is clear evidence that the Ukrainian people are embracing the democratic path to change. Ukraine is embracing democratic values. On that basis alone, should we not continue to fully support the country in its assertion of its territorial integrity?

John Howell: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work with us on the Council of Europe. She makes a very good point. It would be so easy for Ukraine, when it is threatened with Russian annexation and military activity in Donbass, to take a very restrictive attitude to the conduct of elections and what they can achieve, but it has not. It has had full democratic elections that have produced a startling change. She is right that we should compliment Ukraine on that election and do all we can to support it.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): My hon. Friend has rightly set out a litany of sad human rights abuses and cultural vandalism—not only in Crimea and Donbass, but in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, too. Volodymyr Zelensky said in his campaign that he would not see Crimea exchanged for peace in Donbass. Does my hon. Friend agree that he needs to hold fast to that pre-election commitment? When he becomes President in the next couple of weeks, he needs to be robust with Russia and work along with western partners, which was another commitment he made. In seeking peace, he should not seek peace at any cost.

John Howell: I agree. I think we have all looked at the results of the Ukrainian elections with a degree of caution as to what the attitude of the new President will be, but this is not a time to back down from the demands being made for the restoration of Crimea and for an end to the fighting in the Donbass. This is a time for allies to keep making and pushing that point strongly.

Since 2014, Russia has increased the number of troops in occupied Crimea by three times. Armoured vehicles have been increased by five times; artillery by 10 times; jets by five times; and multiple launch rocket systems by 10 times. Most recently, Russia has deployed four battalions of S-400 Triumf missile systems in Crimea, which allows it to cover all of the Black sea, the Azov sea area and most of Ukraine. The Russian Black sea fleet can now fire in a single shot 86 Kalibr, known as “Sizzler”, nuclear-capable missiles, able to reach not only Kiev but other EU capitals.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is giving an amazing speech - a real grounding in the problems faced across the region since the annexation of Crimea. This is not just a problem for Ukraine; as he said earlier, it is a problem for the whole of Europe. He is right about the weapons increase, but the real live-fire risk, towards Europe in particular and against Ukraine on a regular basis, is cyber-attacks.

The NotPetya attack cost the world economy \$10 billion. Unless we also pay attention to sandboxing, the cyber-weapons that have been targeted on Ukraine, its infrastructure, airports, utilities and banks, will turn on Europe. They have been demonstrated to be lethal and will start attacking us, particularly as European elections loom.

John Howell: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. I do not underestimate the effect of Russian cyber-attacks not only on Ukraine, but on the whole of Europe. I am not sure what we can do about them, except to make sure that we are strong in resisting them. She has highlighted the key point: that the issue affects all of us. Once an attack has been launched on Ukraine, it can affect the rest of Europe.

What are we to make of the actions of the Council of Europe, which has now produced a motion that makes it easier for Russia to return by not having the credentials of its members challenged? The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has not suspended Russia; the decision was taken by Russia in 2015 not to present credentials for its own delegation in response to voting restrictions placed on it by PACE following the illegal annexation of Crimea.

The UK is clear that a Russian return to PACE would be contingent on the withdrawal of all Russian military personnel and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, as well as an end to the illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula. I urge the Minister to reject or at least heavily modify the recent recommendation from PACE, which is coming his way as part of the Committee of Ministers and which liberalises the PACE approach.

Angela Smith: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. Does he not agree with me that the credibility of PACE and all the institutions of the Council of Europe is at stake here? It will be very difficult for bodies such as the Venice Commission to go into Ukraine and recommend legal reform if the Council of Europe is seen to be giving way to Russian threats to withdraw financial support for the institution.

John Howell: I agree. At the previous meeting of the Council of Europe, I moved what seemed like countless amendments to try to make the report that had been produced much better. Unfortunately, they were all defeated, although I pay great compliments to one of our Ukrainian colleagues, Serhii Kival, who led a brilliant campaign with us at various times during the Council's proceedings. I agree with the hon. Lady that the credibility of the whole organisation is affected.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): As president of the European Conservatives Group, of which Serhii Kival is a member, I want to echo my hon. Friend's sentiments that he did a phenomenal job. Also, the Ukraine delegation in the Council of Europe, regardless of party—socialists or whatever—are a formidable bunch of characters who really do credit to their nation under the most difficult circumstances. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribbles Valley (Mr Evans) is not in his place at the moment, but at the Inter-Parliamentary Union we have had to separate the Russians and Ukrainians because of provocation. The work that the Ukraine delegations do has been remarkable. I pay tribute to Serhii Kival.

John Howell: I thank my hon. Friend for that tribute, and I agree with it. The Ukrainian delegations have been absolutely fantastic, regardless of politics. They have all stood as one in the Council of Europe and it has been a great pleasure to work with them.

[John Howell]

Finally, I turn to the situation in the Azov sea. Stability remains elusive in eastern Ukraine, and Russia has moved to shore up its hold on Crimea. Russia has built a bridge across the Kerch strait, connecting Crimea to Russia. On 25 November 2018, Russian border patrol ships attacked and seized three Ukrainian navy vessels attempting to enter the sea of Azov from the Black sea through the Kerch strait, in a move that looked designed to gain complete control of the sea of Azov.

In December, suspicions that Russia has nuclear arms in Crimea were reported. Such developments suggest that, although the conflict in the eastern mainland regions of Ukraine may be resolved, Russia does not intend to restore Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea. I am worried that succour may be given to the views I heard coming out of various organisations that both sides in the conflict are to blame. They are not. This is naked Russian aggression. The bridge breaches Ukrainian sovereignty—a particularly dangerous development that we need to condemn.

For all those reasons, the Secretary of State for Defence made a visit to Ukraine before Christmas and we sent a naval vessel to the area—not quite a harking back to gunboat diplomacy, but nevertheless a move that certainly sent a great deal of patriotism through some people's blood. It was meant to send a clear signal to Russia that we will stand by Ukraine, rather than being an act of further provocation.

I understand that we intend to send other Royal Navy ships to provide a more constant British presence. To our Ukrainian friends, I say, "We will support you. I hope that you take that in the intended spirit." This is a terrible tale of a big country throwing its weight around to the detriment of a country which, as its role in the Council of Europe shows, is playing a full part in western culture while retaining its own identity. This is not a good situation. It has made Europe much more prone to instability and increased conflict. I look forward to the Minister's comments and his continuing commitment to trying to ensure that Russia withdraws from Crimea.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. We have five speakers, and half an hour. I call Chris Bryant.

9.59 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Davies. I warmly commend the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for introducing the debate, which is both timely and important. I gather that a joke is going round in Moscow these days: President Putin is asking General Secretary Stalin for advice on what he should do politically, and Stalin says, "You should execute all members of the Government and paint the Kremlin blue." Putin replies, "Why blue?" and Stalin says, "I thought that was the only part you would query." Perhaps there is some exaggeration in the joke, but perhaps there is some truth as well.

The point that the hon. Member for Henley, and others who have been on the delegation with him, made very clearly, and which I am sure the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), who is a known expert on the subject of Ukraine, will make as well, is that the annexation was illegal, full stop—end of story, in a

sense. That is, of course, contested by the Russian Federation, but under any judgment of international law, it is clear that the annexation of Crimea was illegal.

As the hon. Member for Henley said, it followed on from other annexations, attempted annexations or invasions that were also illegal. I warmly commended David Cameron for going to Georgia, as one of his first acts as Conservative leader, to stand with the Georgian people and say that the invasions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were illegal acts. Unfortunately, the agreement that was subsequently signed with President Sarkozy has still not been implemented. There are still Russian troops in Georgia and, as has been laid out today, the problems in relation to Crimea grow day by day.

The truth of the matter is that the annexation would not have happened had the Russian Federation not signed up to the Budapest memorandum, because Ukraine would have had nuclear weapons. In that accord, the Russian Federation guaranteed the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea as part of Ukraine, so there is understandable cynicism and scepticism. I do not know what the highest level of cynicism and scepticism that one can have is, but that is what the international community shares regarding any international treaties signed by the Russian Federation under President Putin.

Many have drawn comparisons with the situation in the 1930s. Such comparisons are important to bear in mind, though it would be wrong to make a direct comparison between Putin and Hitler, because their ideologies were fundamentally different. However, their nationalism and deliberate attempts to use violence to secure their aims probably amounted to the same.

In 1938, the German Chancellor was determined to persuade the international community that he would seize only the Sudetenland—the part of Czechoslovakia that, in his words, was dominated by German-speaking German nationals. In fact, by seizing the Sudetenland he undermined the whole of the rest of Czechoslovakia and made it impossible for it to survive as a nation state. I think that is exactly the intention of the Russian Federation in relation to Ukraine. In the 1930s, British politicians did not really care; they thought that Hitler sort of had a point. Politicians in the UK have also said that President Putin sort of has a point about Crimea, because a lot of the people in Crimea are Russian and identify as Russian speakers. However, that is wholly to miss the point that there has been a deliberate process of political destabilisation in Ukraine that went on for a considerable number of years. As the hon. Member for Henley said, it included a fake referendum that was deliberately engineered. The results were falsely counted, and an incorrect version of them was given out.

Mrs Moon: One of the most important things that we must focus on is the softening-up period before invasion takes place. There is a deliberate disinformation campaign targeted at the Russian-speaking populations, not just in Georgia and Ukraine but on a daily basis in the Baltic states. Such disinformation prepares an expectation among the Russian-speaking population that change is coming, and that they should support it. Is that something to which we should also pay attention?

Chris Bryant: I commend my hon. Friend. She is right, and that is one of the reasons why I am particularly anxious that we, as a political class in this country, have

seemingly decided that we are not all that interested in Russian interference in our elections and electoral processes. I think that we will rue the day in the end. We need to be extremely careful, because we have seen what the Russian Federation has managed to do through cyber-warfare in other countries around the world, and continues to do in Ukraine, because it wants to soften up the rest of the country.

The process of misinformation continues. The latest version of that is the Russian Federation maintaining that Crimea lost 1.5 trillion roubles during the 25 years that it was part of Ukraine. Many would argue that the loss to Crimea is from being taken out of Ukraine. Russian spokespeople do not half have a cheek sometimes.

There is another clear aspect to the annexation. In 1938, Hitler wanted to seize the Skoda factory, which was one of the most productive factories in Europe, and turn it into an arms manufacturer; it was soon making Panzers for the Wehrmacht. Just so, Putin has had his eye for a considerable period on not only the natural resources in Crimea but the ports, which are vital to any future military intentions that he may have. It is all part of a pattern; President Putin always has a tendency to resort to violent options when they are available to him.

Putin was, of course, in political trouble in his own country when the annexation commenced, and it was extremely popular, re-enhancing that nationalist sense in Russian politics. In large measure, one can see the reinvention of Putin as a nationalist hero, in Russian terms, on the back of the annexation of Crimea. There is a sense of political doldrums in the Russian Federation, because Putin clearly has no idea who his successor should be or where the future should lie. He is kind of bored with governing Russia, which potentially makes for a very dangerous time for the international community.

The Government need to be careful about key issues of UK policy. We have referred already to sanctions policy. As I have said to the Minister many times, I fear that the Government are still dragging their heels—he will say that they are not—on implementing a full set of secure sanctions in relation to individuals who have committed human rights abuses in the Russian Federation and Crimea. I think that the Russians have noticed that that has not yet happened, and that other countries have moved faster. It is time that we proceeded faster. I am sure that the Minister will say that the Government are doing their best, and that it will all happen in the fullness of time, but I am not convinced.

Secondly, there was a time when the UK led within the European Union on trying to bind Ukraine into the international community, and on standing up for it in international affairs. That will be more difficult in the future when/if we are no longer a member of the European Union. I wish to know how we will achieve that in the future. I hope that the UK has made strong representations to the United States of America that one cannot oppose annexation in Crimea and support it in the Golan Heights. Annexation is annexation. One cannot simply turn a blind eye because it involves a big ally on one side of the Atlantic, rather than a country that one wants to criticise on the other.

Finally, we of course wish Mr Zelensky, who has been elected, well. It is difficult to see exactly how things will play out. I very much hope that the UK will want to extend a warm hand, to ensure that he ends up on the right side of the argument.

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. We have about 20 minutes and four speakers, which makes five minutes per speaker. I call Mr Whittingdale.

10.9 am

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this debate at an extremely important time for Ukraine, and on doing an excellent job of setting out the facts about the Russian occupation of Crimea.

Like the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), three weeks ago I spent my Sunday sitting in a polling station in Desnianskyi district, a poorer suburb of Kiev, and this Sunday I was in a polling station in Bucha, watching democracy in action. It is always inspiring to see a democratic election in a country that has only recently become free.

One of the striking things about the Ukraine election was that there was absolutely no question about the people's desire for change. As overseas observers, we had some criticisms about access to the media, financing and resources, but there can be no doubt that the result—the election of President-elect Zelensky—reflects the will of the Ukrainian people. I pay tribute to President Poroshenko, who I think achieved many things, but there is a real and deep-seated wish for change, and it was undoubtedly a genuine election.

One of the first things that President-elect Zelensky will have to do is decide how best to confront the Russian aggression and the occupation of parts of his country. The war in Donbass gets a lot of attention—it is a hot war and people are dying there; I went last year to Avdiivka, which is right up against the frontline and is regularly subject to shelling—but we must not overlook Crimea, which has spent five years under occupation.

President-elect Zelensky has not yet said a great deal about his policy, and we must wait to see who he will appoint to key positions such as Foreign Minister, but he has referred to the Budapest memorandum. The signatories to that memorandum—my hon. Friend the Member for Henley rightly drew attention to the fact that the UK is one—have said that they will protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The Ukrainians have an expectation that that commitment will be honoured, even though one of the signatories is responsible for the invasion and occupation of their country. I know that our Government want to pursue the existing dialogue with Russia through the Normandy agreement and the Minsk process, but President-elect Zelensky has said that he sees a role for the Budapest signatories, so if he approaches the UK Government to assist in resolving the situation, I hope that they will respond positively.

My hon. Friend made several points about the invasion of Crimea five years ago; I do not want to repeat them, but I will make a couple of observations. One of the reasons given for the invasion was that, following the revolution of dignity in the Maidan, Kiev was under the control of a fascist and antisemitic Government. Ironically, not only is there no evidence of that Government ever being fascist or antisemitic, but as of Sunday, Ukraine will be only the second country in the whole world, after Israel, to have a President and a Prime Minister who are both Jewish.

[Mr John Whittingdale]

The second reason given for the invasion was the referendum in which the occupants of Crimea expressed a wish to rejoin Russia. It is true that in 1990, when there were genuine plebiscites across Ukraine to determine its future, the biggest minority in favour of joining Russia was in Crimea, although it was only 41%. However, the so-called referendum that took place five years ago did so under the barrels of Kalashnikovs after all media from Ukraine had been cut off. There was a relentless barrage of Russian propaganda, including footage that showed thousands of Ukrainians allegedly fleeing from what the Russian Foreign Ministry described as threats of a massacre—I say “allegedly” because it subsequently emerged that it was footage of a traffic jam of Ukrainian vehicles heading across the border to Poland to do some weekend shopping.

The referendum offered a choice between joining Russia immediately and retaining independence with the right to join Russia after a specified period. Remaining part of Ukraine was not on the ballot paper. Just imagine if a similar question had been asked in our EU referendum three years ago. As my hon. Friend said, the referendum on joining Russia rightly received international condemnation, including by the United Nations General Assembly; resolutions have been passed that point out that the annexation and occupation continue to be illegal.

My hon. Friend was right to highlight the relentless abuse of human rights in Crimea since the Russian occupation. I draw particular attention to the events of 27 March, less than four weeks ago, in which 23 Crimean Tatar civic journalists were arrested, beaten by the Russian FSB and taken out of Crimea. It is not clear where some of them are being held; I am afraid that they are just the latest in a long list of people, particularly Tatars, who have been subjected to torture, abuse, kidnapping and imprisonment.

My hon. Friend rightly referred to the military build-up in Crimea since the Russians took over. There was already a naval base at Sevastopol, of course, but before the occupation there were only 12,500 Russian troops there, whereas there are now estimated to be 32,000. There has also been a build-up of aircraft, naval forces and military vehicles; indeed, it is now reported that there may well be nuclear weapons in Crimea, which is ironic given that the Budapest memorandum was signed specifically in return for Ukraine’s agreement to give up its nuclear weapons.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the situation in the sea of Azov. Just before Christmas, I travelled to Berdyansk and Mariupol, which are both on the sea of Azov, to see the effect of the blockade across the Kerch strait. The bridge that was built prevents a large number of larger ships from entering the sea of Azov, and since the blockade Russian warships have imposed checks on all ships going in. That has had the effect of delaying passage and rendering the businesses of Mariupol and Berdyansk almost uneconomic. Those two cities are subject to economic warfare and must be relieved.

My hon. Friend was right to say that the Ukrainians have done a fantastic job of raising these issues in every international forum. He spoke about his and his colleagues’ work in the Council of Europe; at the annual Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly some 10 days ago, I

listened to a very powerful address by Mr Parubiy, the Speaker of the Ukrainian Rada. It was then countered by the Russians, who said that of course there were no Russians whatever in Donbass and that there never had been—it was an entire fiction. There is an absolute denial of reality by Russia, despite overwhelming evidence.

I pay tribute to the representation of Ukraine in this country. It is a great pleasure to see the Ukrainian ambassador, Her Excellency Natalia Galibarenko, listening to this debate. She is an assiduous attender of such events and does a fantastic job.

My hon. Friend spoke about the need to increase the pressure on Russia, particularly through sanctions. I agree absolutely that it was very important that we passed the Magnitsky amendment. We eagerly await its implementation; I know that the Government intend to move forward, but we would like them to do so somewhat quicker.

I hope that the message that comes out from this debate, and the number of speakers in it, will demonstrate that across the House of Commons there is unanimous support for Ukraine against the illegal occupation of part of the country and the aggressive action of the Russian Federation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. We have 12 minutes for the remaining three Back-Bench speakers, which means an advisory time limit of four minutes each.

10.18 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies.

It is quite unbelievable that the events in the Maidan, in which hundreds of peaceful protesters were murdered by the Yanukovich regime, happened only five years ago, because the sequence of events that his flight to Russia set in motion have changed so much. As for the justifications for the invasion, the most prominent of which seems to have been the idea that Crimea was somehow being returned to the Russian Federation, it is as if the decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet in 1954 was some sort of bureaucratic error that could be corrected only by the application of blunt military force.

The point was well put by the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), whom I thank for securing this debate: the invasion had less to do with the rights of Russophone Ukrainians living in Crimea than with the most brutal of geostrategic realities, namely that Russia needs a Black sea port, its “place in the sun”, just as much now as when Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of All the Russias first annexed it for her Empire in 1784. One could equally say that the presence of Ionian colonists in the 7th century BC means that it should be made an outpost of the Hellenic Republic. If it were predicated on the rights and needs of the people who live there, the Russian Government’s record of maltreatment towards those people would not be so prominent, which is a point that was well put by the hon. Member for Henley in his discussion of the Tatars.

The only extremism we have seen in Crimea is the clampdown on ethnic and religious freedoms enjoyed by the residents of what is a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional

place. Just as Crimea's Tatar population has seen persecution, so has the Ukrainian-language community, with the closure of several Ukrainian Orthodox churches, and the arrest of Archbishop Klyment last month, and the persecution of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. This attack on the most basic rights and democracy in Crimea leads me to my last point, and I hope hon. Members will allow me to indulge in a little introspection.

The Russian invasion of Crimea was followed by a referendum that fraudulently stated that 97% of participants had voted to be subsumed into the Russian Federation, although the real number was closer to 55%, and there was open intimidation at polling stations, so many would be forgiven for not taking part. As someone who has campaigned for the independence of my own country all my adult life and saw the independence referendum in Scotland as a final point in a democratic process that should be held up as the gold standard for this type of constitutional referendum, I say that that standard was not even close to being met in Crimea. Colleagues agreed and disagreed with me during the Scottish referendum, but we all agreed on the process. That was not true in the case of Crimea. Furthermore, when my country does become independent, it will not be to the detriment of the rights and lives of my fellow Scots.

I ask the Government of the Russian Federation to have the courage of their convictions. If the principle of self-determination is so important to them, why do they not extend it to their own subjects and allow status referendums inside the Russian Federation? I am sure the Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvashs, Chechens, Avars, Udmurts, Dargins, Tuvans, Ossetians and Kalmyks, among others, would be delighted to be asked about their participation in the Russian Federation. To begin with, I would settle for Russia returning Crimea to Ukraine and withdrawing its forces and military completely.

I pay tribute to the recent electoral process in Ukraine and I thank the ambassador, who is in the Public Gallery today, for the commendable work that she does across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in promoting peace and democracy within the Ukrainian state.

10.22 am

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) is the most assiduous of members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and I am delighted that he secured this debate. I am also very pleased, as the leader of the delegation, to have seen so many hon. Friends from that delegation here this morning.

I ask the Minister specifically to address the situation that currently faces the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley was absolutely right when he said that, following the annexation of Crimea, the Assembly suspended certain voting rights for the Russian Federation's delegation. We must make it absolutely clear that the Russians were not expelled from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; they chose to walk out. Having walked out, they have since singularly failed on any potential occasion to present their credentials.

Far from taking any remedial action in respect of Donbass, Crimea, Georgia or Moldova, the Russians have now threatened to withhold their payments to the

Council of Europe to the tune of many millions of euros, which of course causes financial embarrassment. The United Kingdom delegation has made it plain that the Council of Europe is not for sale and its principles are not open to blackmail, but, unfortunately, money has become the driving force that has driven the outgoing secretary-general Thorbjørn Jagland and the current president of the Parliamentary Assembly, Liliane Maury Pasquier, to seek to negotiate with Russia, not over the Donbass region or Crimea or human rights, but over money. We now find ourselves in a position of grave danger. Diplomatically, the Russians expect that there will be an extraordinary session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to seek to readmit Russia and to lean upon the rules committee of the Parliamentary Assembly to change the rules to make that possible. That would be an absolute outrage. It would make the future of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and its whole *raison d'être* very precarious indeed.

The Russians have made no move to release the sailors who were arrested on the warships that were boarded, no moves towards improvements in human rights, no movement towards withdrawal from Donbass and no movement towards a resolution of the situation in Crimea. That is entirely unacceptable.

It cannot be right that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, established after the war by Churchill, Jean Monnet and others to seek to bring an end to the twin threats of fascism and communism, should be sold out by its current leadership in this way. The new President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, needs the support of the western world, not appeasement. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will send the message very clearly through the ambassador to the effect that the United Kingdom stands resolute, and will remain resolute, in its support of Ukraine.

10.25 am

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): History is everything and the history of Crimea is a lot more complex than today's debate has so far suggested. Crimea was annexed by Catherine the Great in 1783 and was Russian for the best part of two centuries. After the Russian revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union, Crimea was part of the Russian, not the Ukrainian, Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Changes to boundaries in the USSR were of course arbitrary and were decided solely by Moscow, with no reference to the peoples of the Soviet Union.

In 1946, Crimea was stripped of its status as a so-called autonomous republic and reduced to a mere oblast of Russia, equivalent to a county. In another entirely arbitrary move by Khrushchev, the oblast of Crimea was transferred from Russia to Ukraine in 1954. Needless to say, not a single Member of the House of Commons or the House of Lords objected to that arbitrary denial of the right of self-determination of the people of Crimea.

During the fall of the USSR, we recognised self-determination as the paramount factor. That is why we supported the independence of Kazakhstan, Belarus and other federative republics. The Crimea oblast also wanted self-determination and in January 1991, Crimean voters voted to be an equal partner in Gorbachev's new

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

union. A few months later, of course, Ukraine voted for independence. We never recognised the Crimean right to self-determination.

As we know, Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. I am sure the referendum was inadequate and we have heard all about that, but no one doubts for a moment that for a considerable part of its history, Crimea has been part of Russia and that the overwhelming part of the population, following heavy immigration over the best part of two centuries, is Russian. The people of Crimea would probably—although we really have no idea—rather like to be independent of both Ukraine and Russia. Ideally, there would be a referendum held under independent international scrutiny and that would be the result, but we do not know.

The situation is extremely complex. Russia is not going to give up Crimea. I do not condone that, and I do not condone the annexation. I have argued against the annexation in the Council of Europe. With my colleagues, I have argued that the Russians should not be allowed in just because of the blackmail to which they are subjecting the Council of Europe. We should stand firm. I think the Council of Europe would benefit from restructuring and becoming a leaner place, and after that, of course, we on the Council of Europe have to decide whether Russia should be readmitted, despite the fact that it will almost certainly never give up Crimea.

That is why the Minister's summing-up speech is all-important. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) said, the Council of Europe has simply stripped Russia of its voting rights; it has refused to present its credentials, but it is still a member of the Committee of Ministers. The Minister must now tell us what the attitude of the United Kingdom Government is. Do the Government believe that Russia should stay in the Council of Europe as a member of the Committee of Ministers? Following the debate we had in the Council of Europe a couple of weeks ago, the decision on whether Russia should be readmitted to the Parliamentary Assembly will almost certainly depend on the Committee of Ministers. Frankly, the Government can no longer be mealy-mouthed about this. They can no longer have good relations with Russia but say that we should bear the brunt in the Council of Europe for its exclusion. We look forward to hearing what the Minister says.

10.30 am

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing the debate, and on his excellent speech. It was factual, considered and forensic in laying out the current situation in Crimea.

Like other hon. and right hon. Members, I congratulate President-elect Zelensky. As the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) mentioned, Zelensky is a Jewish national, and Ukraine becomes only the second country in the world with both a Jewish President and Jewish Prime Minister. I look forward to Sputnik news and the Russia Today headline telling us that the fascists and Nazis have just elected a Jew as their leader—no

doubt such nonsense will follow. It somewhat scorches the myth that Russian speakers in Ukraine are being uniquely persecuted by the Government, given that the new President-elect is a Russian speaker and Russian is his first language.

Given that the ambassador of Ukraine joins us here today, I want to mention the appalling events that took place in Holland Park two weeks ago this coming Saturday, when the ambassador's car—thankfully, she was not in it—was deliberately rammed more than once by someone who is currently being held under the Mental Health Acts.

I want to address a few of the issues that have been raised by hon. and right hon. Members, starting with the illegality of the referendum. The Scottish National party does not recognise the referendum that took place in 2014, and we do not recognise the status of Crimea somehow being reunified with Russia either. We know a thing or two about independence movements and referendums in my party. Indeed, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) knows a thing about them as well. What took place in Crimea in 2014 was a sham and should be called out as such by anyone who believes in the democratic rights of people to express how they wish to be governed.

Like other hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken, I have visited Ukraine on a couple of occasions. In common with the right hon. Member for Maldon, I once went out to Avdiivka. As he says, it is right on the frontline with the illegally occupied Donbass region. In that context, we need to get the terminology right. Indeed, the last time I was there, I had this discussion with a journalist. These are Russian-led forces. They are not Russian-backed separatists or forces; they are Russian-led, and they are not all separatists. Some of them wish Donbass to be independent, some wish it to join Russia, and some wish it to be more autonomous within Ukraine. They are Russian-led terrorists and nothing else.

I turn to how we can support Ukraine as individual Members of Parliament, part of which includes not appearing on channels such as Russia Today and Sputnik. Indeed, there are hon. Members who have spoken in this debate—they are no longer in their place, so I will not name them—who do exactly that. They are part of the problem. They include members of my own party, and one quite high-profile former member even has his own television show on Russia Today. For shame that they continue to appear on those channels. For shame that there are Members of this House who not only appear, but take money in return. There are also former Ministers of the current Government who appear on RT. It must stop: otherwise all the poetic speeches mean absolutely nothing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise, as I could not be here earlier, as I wanted; I was at a Northern Ireland Affairs Committee hearing. The hon. Gentleman is referring to Crimea, where human rights have been denied. In eastern Ukraine, Baptist Church ministers have gone missing and cannot be found. Churches have been destroyed and people have been persecuted. Wherever Russia's right-wing influence is, it is clear that Christians are persecuted and human rights are abused. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should take every opportunity to approach the Russian Government,

and Putin in particular, to ensure that Christians are not persecuted beyond any other religion in that part of Ukraine?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I absolutely agree. The hon. Gentleman speaks on these issues regularly and with authority. He is an hon. Gentleman, and I chastise him gently by pleading with him—beseeching him—not to appear on the state broadcaster of the Government who do the terrible things that he has outlined.

I shall conclude, because I see that time is pressing on. The Minister is sound on the issue of Ukraine. Will he tell us what work is being undertaken to free the Azov sailors who are being held illegally by the Russian Federation? In addition to strengthening the sanctions, which he is regularly asked to do, can we lead an international effort to halt Nord Stream 2? It is one of the most dangerous economic and political projects going on in Europe right now. In response to questions that I have asked, the answers that have come from the Minister suggest that the Government do not see it as their issue. It is an issue for all of Europe and everyone who believes in the stability of Europe.

I believe that Crimea will come back to Ukraine one day. Just as the Berlin wall fell, surely Crimea will be reunited with Europe, as it rightly should be. There are Russians who look on with envy at what took place in the Ukrainian elections, and they deserve better than what they have right now. We should extend our friendship to them, because some people want to see a change in Russian society and its political leadership so that it too can be democratic, prosperous and free, and get rid of the miserable tyranny that it suffers under right now.

10.37 am

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this debate. I commend him for the great interest he has taken in this issue for a long time, and for the depth of experience that he showed in his speech. It was very comprehensive and it enlightened people who have not visited Ukraine or been so aware of the relevant issues.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the non-suspension of Russia from the Council of Europe. How we deal with Russia is important, particularly as it is not currently taking part in the Council. As a former member, I understand that. The Council of Europe occupies a pivotal position in this dispute and in relation to Europe as a whole. In that sense, it is a phenomenally important institution, and its great work must continue.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the “sham referendum” in Crimea and challenged the official statistics. An issue of concern to us all is the illegal occupation of Crimea and the legislative position that Russia has taken, particularly in giving people Russian nationality. The conscription of the Crimean people into the Russian army is also a significant concern.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned, too, the desecration of religious places, which is really important for us to address. Certainly, Orthodox churches, the Jewish community and mosques have been targeted. As he rightly said, the treatment of the Tatar community, a significant group in Crimea, has been a long-standing

issue in the occupation of Crimea. Russia’s treatment of the Tatars, its persecution of the Jewish and Muslim communities and its targeting of Orthodox churches is to be condemned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) spoke about the military activity in Donbass and praised the election. I, too, welcome the election of Volodymyr Zelensky, who has followed a fairly untraditional route. The right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) observed the election, and deemed the process to be reasonably good. When the election was suspended in December, I was slightly concerned that it would not go ahead, but Ukraine has shown itself to be a mature democracy. That peaceful election is a positive step forward for it, and electing somebody who was not previously involved in the political process is a phenomenally good thing. The new President will have to look at serious issues, such as corruption and how to move democracy forward.

I was slightly concerned by the comments of the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who said that the President may seek to exchange peace in Donbass for Crimea. It is not our place to direct the thinking of the President of Ukraine or influence how he sees fit to negotiate. No elected Member of any country would seek to give away any part of their territory. On the contrary, Ukraine continues to fight to be reunified with Crimea.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: If the hon. Gentleman is not seeking to tell people how we should react to situations, he will need to clarify why he said during the Kerch strait aggression that there needs to be de-escalation on both sides, when there was no fault from the Ukrainian side: the only aggressor was the Russian Federation. Will he clarify whether he believes that the Ukrainian Government were an aggressor, or whether it was just the Russian Federation?

Mr Mahmood: I certainly agree that there was no aggression on the part of Ukraine. There has only been aggression by the Russian state in relation to the occupation of Crimea—I say that unconditionally. I was trying to say that it is not our position to guide or interfere in the policies that the President of Ukraine makes in relation to his own country. He was elected in a peaceful, democratic election. I was taking issue with the comments of the hon. Member for The Wrekin. It is important that we look at those issues and resolve them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who, I believe, is on her way to Brussels as we speak, made some pointed comments about interference in elections, particularly in relation to cyber and digital aggression against Ukraine. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has published a fairly significant report into that, and its Chair has done some significant work on the matter. We continue to be concerned about that issue, and my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) continues to take a keen interest in it.

What is happening in the Azov sea is a very serious issue, and we should look at addressing it through sanctions. That is where the Nord Stream 2 pipeline comes into play. We must look not just at Russian participation in the Council of Europe, but at how the Minister can work with Germany, given that a significant

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

trade deal involving gas supplies has been done. There are underlying problems with Nord Stream 2. The initial pipeline that was put in takes money away from Ukraine as a way to punish it, so we must look at how we can support Ukraine. We should use the pipeline as a negotiating tool to try to push this issue forward. That is a serious issue for us to deal with. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made, I think, a reasonably good joke. He made a comparison with Georgia. We must bear that in mind and ensure we stop any further interventions.

Time is running short, and the Minister wants to get in. I ask him to address the issue of the sailors currently being held by the Russians. We must look at how we can influence that situation. The passage to the Azov sea, the bridge that has been built and the Nord Stream 2 pipeline are serious issues. We must try to get influence so that we gain a reasonable negotiating position with Russia to deal with the issue of Crimea. The Magnitsky amendment, which the right hon. Member for Maldon spoke about, is very important. If the Government can push it along, it would go some way to dealing with the situation.

Finally, I pay tribute to the Ukrainian ambassador, who is in the Public Gallery, for the great work that she continues to do. I hope that the recent attack on her car will not hinder our relationship or her great work.

10.48 am

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) for initiating this debate, and for setting out the arguments so clearly and in such a well-informed manner—as did all hon. Members who contributed.

At the outset, I want to comment on the outcome of Ukraine's presidential election. With the vast majority of votes counted, Volodymyr Zelensky won Sunday's second round run-off with just over 73% of the vote. It is a testament to the development of Ukraine's democracy that the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights judged the second round to be peaceful and competitive. Its representative stated that the process respected fundamental freedoms.

I also pay tribute to President Poroshenko, who led Ukraine over the past five years in the face of unprecedented security and foreign policy challenges. He has accepted the choice of the Ukrainian people with great dignity and has offered to work with the President-elect. Our Prime Minister spoke to President-elect Zelensky yesterday. She congratulated him on his clear victory and assured him of the UK's ongoing support. That important commitment is at the heart of today's topic. We will debate one aspect of Ukraine's territorial integrity: Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. The Government's position is absolutely clear: Crimea and Sevastopol are part of Ukraine. Russia's illegal annexation and its continuing destabilisation of Ukraine is reprehensible. This Government will never recognise or legitimise Russia's status in Crimea.

It is now five years since Russia illegally annexed 10,000 square miles of sovereign Ukrainian territory. Russia's military intervention and subsequent unlawful

referendum violated not only the Ukrainian constitution, but international law. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley clearly outlined, Russia is now using a whole range of strategies to maintain its hold on Ukrainian territory and undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. It uses political manipulation and disinformation to fuel the conflict and interfere with elections; it forcibly moves Ukrainian citizens out of Crimea and moves Russian citizens in, in violation of the Geneva convention; and it persistently fails to meet its commitments under the Minsk agreements. It should withdraw its forces from all of Ukraine.

As we have heard, in November, Russia attacked and seized Ukrainian vessels and 24 servicemen as they sought to enter the sea of Azov through the Kerch strait, as they have every right to do. Those servicemen continue to be detained in Moscow. I call on Russia to release these servicemen immediately and return the vessels to Ukraine.

Russian authorities have overseen the militarisation and the systematic restriction of fundamental rights and freedoms in Crimea, including freedom of expression, of movement and of religion, as well as the right to peaceful assembly. Despite repeated calls in UN General Assembly resolutions, Russia has not permitted the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit to make a full independent assessment of the human rights situation. Even without such an assessment, the weight of evidence is damning. Minority groups, such as Crimean Tatars, face clear and increasing levels of persecution. Twenty-three Tatars were unlawfully detained following raids on their homes on 27 March, for example. Russia continues to ban the Tatars' representative institution, the Mejlis. That violates a 2017 International Court of Justice order.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has also documented a catalogue of abuses against political opponents and minorities in Crimea. Those abuses include arbitrary detentions and arrests, enforced disappearances and torture. Those who refuse to recognise Russian-based legislation applicable to Crimea are denied their basic human rights. Ukrainians face pressure to renounce their citizenship in favour of Russian citizenship; if they refuse, they are denied access to basic services. Crimeans are being forcibly conscripted into the Russian military—nearly 15,000 have been conscripted since 2015.

The UK is instrumental in ensuring a robust international response to Russia's actions. Following the annexation of Crimea, Russia was suspended from the G8. The EU, the US, and partners including Canada and Australia, imposed a robust package of sanctions targeting key sectors of Russia's economy, and we continue to co-ordinate our response to Russia's actions.

Chris Bryant: I bring the Minister back to my earlier point about the Golan Heights. Would it not undermine our position if we opposed annexation in Crimea but endorsed the US position on the annexation of the Golan Heights?

Sir Alan Duncan: I hope that everyone in this Chamber is in favour of the consistent application of such rules across the world, be it with Israel or with Russia. That consistent application is essential if we are to defend what is widely known as the rules-based international order.

Many of those responsible for the annexation have been sanctioned. We have imposed stringent restrictions on doing business in Crimea, for instance. Importing goods from Crimea is illegal and exports to key sectors are banned. We will not legitimise the annexation by making it easy to do business there.

Following the visit to Odesa in December by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, the UK also extended and deepened our military assistance to Ukraine through the Operation Orbital training mission. NATO measures to enhance allies' capability and presence in the Black sea will also contribute to an increased regional deterrent.

Sir Edward Leigh: Is it the Government's view that the Russian Federation should be expelled from the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe?

Sir Alan Duncan: When we have something to say, we will choose the time to say it. This is not the forum in which to comment on the Council of Europe, because the debate, as on the Order Paper, is on Crimea.

With respect to the human rights situation, the UK continues to provide funding to Crimean human rights non-governmental organisations and to the UN human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine, to help document and highlight human rights abuses.

It is testament to the bravery and fortitude of Crimean civil society that it continues to speak out in the face of relentless harassment. I know that some hon. Members took the opportunity to meet some remarkable Ukrainian human rights activists in Parliament last month. They were here for the screening of a documentary—partly funded by the UK—that highlights Russia's human rights record in the peninsula, and the plight of over 70 political prisoners. Among such prisoners is Oleg Sentsov, who has been detained since 2014. The Foreign Secretary and I have consistently voiced our serious concerns about his welfare and deteriorating health. We have also condemned Russia for failing to provide Pavlo Hryb and Edem Bekirov with the urgent medical care that they need. They have been detained since August 2017 and December 2018 respectively.

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, and its continued interference in Ukraine, are illegal under international law. Ukraine chose a Euro-Atlantic

future, and Russia must respect Ukraine's sovereign decision, its independence and its territorial integrity. Until that happens, there can be no return to normal relations with Russia. That is why we will work to strengthen the resolve of the international community to stand firm against behaviour of this sort by Russia, to keep Crimea in the spotlight, and to expose Russia's human rights violations.

We will continue to work with the Ukrainian Government to support its sovereignty and territorial integrity. We welcome the peaceful conduct of the presidential election on Sunday, and I congratulate Ukraine on holding the elections in an open and transparent manner. I offer my personal congratulations to Volodymyr Zelensky. Not only are the Prime Minister and the President-elect both Jewish, but they are both called Volodymyr. I also express gratitude to President Poroshenko for his leadership over the last five years in the face of the unprecedented security and foreign policy challenges for Ukraine. I welcome the strong partnership that we have built with Ukraine, in which we will continue to invest considerable energy.

In her call with President-elect Zelensky, the Prime Minister reiterated that the UK stands shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine. We will continue to remind the world that Crimea and Sevastopol are Ukrainian, that we will not recognise Russia's illegal annexation, and that Russia will continue to face costs for its flagrant disregard for international law.

10.58 am

John Howell: The debate has been excellent. I thank all who participated, and the Minister for his response. I add my welcome to the Ukrainian ambassador, who has sat through our proceedings and witnessed every moment of the debate. Ukraine can be assured of our support, and that we will do everything we can to ensure that it is safe and has an integral border on which it can rely.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Pension Credit Changes

11 am

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pension credit changes.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies.

14 January was a pivotal day: not only was there a meaningful vote on Brexit but on that day the Government announced in a written statement that from 15 May 2019 both partners in a couple need to reach state pension age to claim pension credit or pension age housing benefit. That change has been on the statute book since 2012, but the announcement was made quietly through a written ministerial statement on one of the busiest days in Parliament, only four months before it was due to come into effect. Full details of the impact have not yet been published, nor do we have detailed information on how the proposal will operate in a wide range of possible circumstances.

My first question for the Minister is: why was the proposed change made in a written statement and not by a vote of the House? That sets a dangerous precedent—a change put on the statute book two Governments ago, two Parliaments ago, in 2012 is being made now via a written statement instead of another vote in the House.

The Government say that 115,000 mixed-age couples receive pension credit and/or housing benefit. Couples who claim after 14 May could be up to £7,000 worse off compared with a couple claiming now. I will come back to those figures and give some examples. The Department for Work and Pensions estimates that in 2019-20, 15,000 mixed-age couples will be affected by the change. That rises to 30,000 in 2020-21 and 40,000 in 2021-22. In theory, the change applies only to future claimants, but it will also hit any pensioner in a mixed-age couple in receipt of pension credit whose claim is interrupted. As Age Scotland and Age UK point out, couples claiming in the future could be nearly £140 a week worse off than before the change—as I said, an incredible £7,000-per-year cut for some pensioners.

That figure is noteworthy when taken in the context of another one: 40% of people entitled to pension credit do not claim it, whether through lack of knowledge or because of accessibility issues. What are the Government doing to assist such people to take up pension credit, given that alarming figure of 40%?

Age Scotland and Age UK provided me with a figure for an average Glasgow South West constituent in two scenarios, both taking into account state pension, pension credit, housing benefit, council tax reductions, health vouchers and the cold weather payment, and both for a mixed-age couple renting a one-bedroom, council tax band C property, paying rent of £510 a month and receiving state pension of £160 a week.

In the first scenario, the couple would receive total benefits of £395.46 a week, £1,581.84 a month or £19,097.08 a year; the total annual state pension income would be £8,320, so the income lost if no benefits were received and they relied only on some state pension would be £10,777.08. Secondly, the charities investigated how the same couple would fare if they were claiming universal credit, which is already a decisively less generous benefit

and has well documented difficulties in claiming and sustaining payments. Even so, they would face a total annual loss of £6,751.24.

Under the universal credit rules, rather than the existing state pension credit situation, older people face a particularly substantial loss of income—a devastating loss, especially for those on low incomes. It is therefore vital that in the first instance we encourage everyone eligible for pension credit to claim it. It is scandalous to think that people would be financially better off if they lived apart than if they lived together.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is making a powerful speech. A lot of people who reach pension age are struggling to be able to work, although they may not be able to access disability or sickness benefits because of their condition. Does he agree that this change will affect such couples in particular, many of whom include a WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—woman unable to claim the state pension or, as part of a couple, pension credit? Those women will be doubly dissatisfied.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. I will come on to the 1950s-born women and the double whammy affecting them. She makes an excellent point about those on benefits and low income and, as she will be aware because we have just come from the Select Committee on Work and Pensions where we were discussing “No DSS” adverts in the private rented sector, the change could have devastating implications for those people too.

Will the Minister therefore accept the calculations from Age UK and Age Scotland? Will he advise us whether there has been a recent equality impact assessment since January’s announcement? I understand that there was an impact assessment back in 2012, but will he tell us whether there has been an updated equality impact assessment on the pension credit change?

In 2010, a woman aged 60 and her partner aged 65 would both have been entitled to their state pension and both been considered pensioners for pension credit. From 15 May 2019, they will have to wait an extra six years to be in that position. In essence, the change will impose a financial penalty on pensioners who have a younger partner. That is why some WASPI women in Glasgow refer to the change as the “toy boy tax”, as well as the “age gap tax”.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, one in six pensioners in the UK already live in poverty. This Government policy will mean that many pensioners might find themselves in the position of being financially better off if they split up with or lived apart from their partner. Pensioners should not be put in a position where it would be better living alone.

As the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) outlined, the policy change will adversely affect women born during the 1950s—precisely the group impacted by other Government decisions to raise the state pension age. Anyone hit by that double whammy will be entitled to feel especially aggrieved, and I can tell the hon. Lady and the Minister that certainly in my constituency the campaigners for the 1950s-born women do feel especially aggrieved by the change and regard it as a double whammy.

The public will be left with little faith in the Government and their ability to deliver pension justice for women born in the 1950s. The Women's Budget Group states that "pension credit is the single most important poverty alleviation mechanism for older people that we have in this country".

The Government should make time for a new debate and a vote on the change, given that the decision was made seven years ago—two Parliaments ago. Rather than just enforcing the change, it is time to have another debate and vote.

According to OECD figures, the UK has the lowest state pension in the developed world; the change will only increase discrepancies. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's "UK Poverty 2018" report highlighted the fact that previous falls in pensioner poverty were in part due to the introduction of pension credit. Universal credit will not adequately meet the needs of a household of retirement age because of the strict requirements for seeking work, such as signing on at the jobcentre, qualifying as an unpaid carer or proving inability to work. Changes should be immediately introduced to ensure that older people do not suffer as a result. The policy change will be seen as a stealth tax on ageing couples on low incomes.

The Department for Work and Pensions has confirmed that it expects to save almost £1.1 billion over the next five years due to the changes. Tom McPhail, head of policy at Hargreaves Lansdown, commented that

"the impact on individuals and their household spending will amount to hundreds or even thousands of pounds per year and for some it could present real problems".

The meagre savings that the Government will make from the policy change will not match the disastrous consequences that will ensue. If the change is not abandoned, it is anticipated that there will be a consequential increase in demand for support from the Scottish welfare fund, which provides crisis grants to families and people in Scotland on low incomes.

Pensioners could face a heavy financial penalty for having a younger partner. That could affect the health and well-being of those affected and is likely to increase the number of older people living in poverty. Pensioners should not be put in a situation where they could be better off living alone and claiming pension credit than living as part of a couple and receiving universal credit. The change could put pressure on existing relationships. Although the intention is to protect those receiving pensioner benefits before 15 May, they could lose their entitlement if their circumstances change, even if only for one day.

Ruth George: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that thousands of pensioner couples are affected but unaware? I highlighted to the Minister before the recess my concern that the gov.uk calculator incorrectly shows people that they cannot claim pension credit when, in fact, they are entitled to it.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point; the lack of information has been a real issue, particularly for women born in the 1950s, many of whom did not receive letters about the pension changes. I have previously joked that I would be more likely to find a golden ticket in a Wonka bar than find a woman who received a letter about the pension changes.

The universal credit system was designed for people of working age, not pensioners. For example, it includes no additional support for a couple where one member is not expected to work because they are over state pension age.

I thank hon. Members for attending the debate. The pension change is a toy boy tax for many; it is certainly an age gap tax. I look forward to the Minister's response. I hope he will tell me that the changes will be paused so that we can vote in the House on whether they should take place.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing a debate on this important issue.

The Government believe that work is the best route out of poverty. Our reforms of the welfare system are designed to help people into work, make work pay and provide support for those in need. Those are the principles that underpin universal credit—the most significant change to the welfare system for decades—and are the context for the changes we are talking about today.

Single people can claim pension-age benefits only when they have reached state pension age. However, a person under state pension age who has a partner over that age can currently receive benefits intended to support economically inactive pensioner households, without having to meet any work-related conditions. That runs counter to our aim of encouraging people of working age to remain in the labour market and continue saving for their retirement.

As part of the reforms introduced by the coalition Government in 2012, the Welfare Reform Act 2012 set out that a couple will be able to access pensioner levels of means-tested support only when both partners have reached state pension age. In response to one of the hon. Gentleman's first points, we have been clear that the change will not be introduced until the roll-out of new claims to universal credit is complete. That roll-out was completed earlier this year; consequently, on 14 January we announced that we will implement the mixed-age-couples change with effect from 15 May.

I will try to address all the hon. Gentleman's points. Regarding the change being made by a written statement at a particular time, the changes to pension credit that commenced following the order made on 14 January were fully debated on three occasions during the passage of the Welfare Reform Act, and were voted on in Committee. The powers under which the order was made do not require the order to be subject to any further parliamentary scrutiny, since it brings into force primary legislation that Parliament already agreed should be implemented by a commencement order.

Ruth George: When the changes were debated back in 2012 as part of the Welfare Reform Act, universal credit was still a similar level of benefit to tax credits. Since then, following the 2015 budgetary changes, universal credit has been worth significantly less, and increased numbers of people on universal credit are in poverty. Does the Minister not agree that that should be a reason for Parliament to debate again the changes that will affect hundreds of thousands more, often vulnerable, households, in the light of the changed circumstances?

Guy Opperman: With respect, Parliament has debated the matter and made a decision. The hon. Lady will be aware of the 2011 equality impact assessment, the 2012 risk assessment, the universal credit impact assessment, and the ad hoc statistical analysis published on 28 February, which outlined the number of people affected, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned—approximately 115,000 mixed-age couples in the United Kingdom.¹

Chris Stephens: I want to come back to the ministerial statement. There have been various changes to the political make-up of Parliament since 2012. There must be at least 200 new MPs since then, and I think they would want to consider the change, particularly in the light of other benefit changes, as the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) said. Did the Department consider a fresh debate? The Minister mentioned the quality impact assessment. Could he tell us whether a fresh equality impact assessment was made this year prior to the announcement on 14 January?

Guy Opperman: I cannot go back to the specific debates in 2012 and say chapter and verse what was discussed at that stage, but it is a relatively normal procedure for this House to legislate on matters that will be contingent on a written ministerial statement or a commencement order. That standard practice was followed in this case. I am not aware of a fresh equality impact assessment being done. The equality impact assessment was done in respect of the Welfare Reform Act.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is interesting to listen to hon. Members. I often find that the SNP tend to weaponise welfare issues to make the charge for independence. My understanding is that powers have been devolved to Scotland under the Scotland Act 2016. Could the Minister confirm what powers are available to the Scottish Government to address this issue? Has he had any constructive discussions with the Scottish Government on the issue that the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) raises? I understand that they are pushing back the use of those powers until 2024. Does the Minister agree that rather than giving her sixth statement on indyref2 today, perhaps the First Minister should make a statement about how she will use her powers to address the issue?

Guy Opperman: I will deal with that point and then perhaps return to it in more detail later. I accept that there are other points relevant to this debate, but it is inevitable that devolution will come up when one discusses welfare with a colleague from the Scottish National party and other Scottish colleagues. Certainly, it has come up in relation to the campaigns on the state pension age.

My hon. Friend will be aware of two facts in particular. First, Jeane Freeman, who was my opposite number as the Scottish pensions Minister, wrote to my predecessor on 22 June 2017 concerning the powers under sections 26, 28 and 24 of the Scotland Act. Of particular interest is section 26, about which she wrote:

“This power is limited to providing help with ‘short term needs’, and those needs must require to be met to avoid a risk to a person’s wellbeing. That would not readily allow assistance to the majority of the women affected by the acceleration of the increase in their State Pension Age. Their needs and the risks to their well-being would have to be assessed individually.”

1. [Official Report, 16 May 2019, Vol. 660, c. 4MC.]

She also dealt with the creation of a new benefit under section 28, which is a possibility, and the top-up of reserved benefits under section 24, which is a wide-ranging power to make discretionary payments.

That deals with the original point in 2017. The point can then fairly be made that if the Scottish Government disagree with any of the UK Government’s welfare reforms, they have powers to do something about that in Scotland. I want to make it absolutely clear that, in addition to the substantial support that the UK Government are providing, the Scottish Government have significant new powers available to them to tailor welfare provision for people in Scotland. Although pensions themselves are very definitely a reserved matter, the Scotland Act gives the Scottish Government the ability to use a wide range of new welfare provisions.

I was asked specifically whether I have been engaged with by Scottish Ministers who seek to provide specific top-up support for mixed-age couples. I have not been made aware of any such information being provided to me. Frankly, it is not for the UK Government to do that. If the Scottish Government wish to do that, the ball is in their court, given their powers under the Scotland Act. Clearly, that is a matter for the hon. Member for Glasgow South West to take up with the Scottish Government at Holyrood.

Let me return to the change itself, which ensures that the younger partner has the same work incentives as others of the same age. Those claiming universal credit have access to tailored support from work coaches to help them find work, and universal credit is designed to ensure that work always pays, which is not the case for pension credit.

Let me try to address the specific point raised by the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George). First, I endeavoured to address her emails of 10 and 11 April, which arrived shortly before Easter and were looked at by the Department over Easter. I have written her a letter. We exchanged comments before the debate, and I accept that she has not received that letter. I signed it off late yesterday afternoon, on my first day back in the Department; to be fair to the Department, there is no criticism of it whatever. I also wrote a letter to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, but we managed to get that to him in time.

I am conscious that the hon. Lady raised a specific fault. I am happy to put it on the record that there was an acceptance that that was a fault, and that, as of 18 April, it has been fixed. The reality of the situation is that the calculator provided the wrong outcome in one particular instance—for couples where one member is in receipt of carer’s allowance and the other retains an underlying entitlement to carer’s allowance. I will leave her to look at the specifics of the letter when she receives it later today. I am grateful to her and the Derbyshire team for bringing the issue to our attention. It has been rectified, and I hope the position on that matter has been addressed.

The hon. Lady raised a separate issue about pension credit generally. It is entirely the case that we are attempting to encourage people to be in a position to take up pension credit in a particular way, and there most definitely is a desire for that to happen. All 115,000 existing mixed-age couples involved were written to subsequent to the decision being made in January. Although I do

not have a regional breakdown of that figure, 8,000 people will potentially be affected in Scotland. I do not have localised figures for the hon. Lady's area.

I want to stress that the change does not in any way affect entitlement to state pension or the level of state pension. Mixed-age couples who are already receiving pension credit or pension-age housing benefit on 14 May will not be affected for as long as they remain entitled to either of those benefits. As I said, we have written directly to those couples to inform them of the change. The change therefore will apply mainly to working-age couples currently claiming means-tested benefit, or to mixed-age couples who apply for benefit only after the date of the change.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for giving way again; he is being very generous. On the calculations, has he had any meetings with Age UK or Age Scotland, which indicate that people could be £7,000 a year worse off as a result of the change?

Guy Opperman: Age UK has met repeatedly—as recently as last month, as I understand it—with civil servants and special advisers in the Department for Work and Pensions. It is almost impossible to state what a future calculation will be without taking into account whether the individual will apply for a job and what their allowances for caring responsibilities and their other entitlements will be. There is a requirement and a desire for universal credit to incentivise and reward paid work, while pension credit is intended to provide long-term support to pensioner households who have left the labour market permanently through retirement.

Ruth George: Will the Minister address the point about carers in households that have had a letter about their pension credit? What will be done for them?

Guy Opperman: I will write to the hon. Lady on that point. I will ensure that she has an answer within seven days. I accept that we did not get a letter to—

Ruth George: It is the people affected I am worried about, rather than the response to me.

Guy Opperman: Well, I will write to the hon. Lady on that point, because I want to address the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, whose debate this is, about pensioner poverty. He criticised the Government in that respect, but I would push back on that.

We are forecast to spend £120 billion on benefits for pensioners in 2019-20, including £99 billion on the state pension. He will be aware that, by reason of the triple lock, from April 2019 the yearly amount of the basic state pension will be around £675 higher than if it had just been uprated by earnings since April 2010, and that the value of the full state pension as a proportion of average earnings is at one of its highest points since the late 1980s.

I could go on about the number of people in employment, which has risen dramatically, the increases in state pension and the successes of automatic enrolment in the employed sphere, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to address this matter. If I have missed anything, I will of course write to him.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Ten Years of the Work Capability Assessment

[SIR HENRY BELLINGHAM *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered 10 years of the work capability assessment in relation to employment and support allowance and universal credit.

This feels like such an inadequate environment to describe the work capability assessment and its brutal consequences. I wish that every single person affected by the system could be here with us in the Chamber and look in the eyes of those who defend the system. I hope that when they have heard what I am about to describe, Conservative Members—there are not many of them—will feel shame, and that in this debate we can do justice to the experiences of those subject to the work capability assessment.

The work capability assessment for the employment and support allowance and universal credit should be a simple concept: people who have a physical or mental health problem or a disability that means that they cannot work or have a limited ability to work will receive a replacement income from the state. I will talk about the face-to-face application process and the assessment, which are draconian, elicit fear, deny justice and have, in some circumstances, ended up contributing to the end of life. As Frances Ryan wrote recently in *The Guardian*, suicide is becoming a feature of the system.

Everyone in the Chamber will know someone who is unable to work for whatever reason. Those with personal wealth are often able to avoid having to prove that they are worthy of income replacement. Because they have that personal wealth, they are safe from having to share every single detail of a condition or illness, and do not have to wonder if they will be believed. People without savings, on the other hand, are only one step away—one accident or one conversation with the doctor—from being subject to that system.

Let me set out some of the elements that we believe are wrong with the system; this is based on evidence gathered from my constituents when they come to surgeries, on submissions by professionals, and on the vast number of submissions I have received from people currently applying for this social security payment. In both the application form and the face-to-face assessment, the descriptors that enable a score to be given to assess a person's ability to carry out tasks are essentially a functionality test. They cannot capture the fluctuating nature of physical and mental unwellness or disability and how that could prevent or limit the ability to work. People often describe feeling punished for telling the truth. Yes, perhaps they could go out unescorted on a journey somewhere, but the test is not interested in, for example, the panic attack before leaving the house, or the emotional recovery afterwards. Perhaps venturing to the supermarket will have been their only trip out that month, but making that journey could lose them their entitlement.

In reality, one day someone may be in the depths of despair, and the pain from their condition may be unbearable; the next day, they may be able to have a laugh over a cup of tea with a loved one. The question is, should they lie about that laughter or feel shame about it because they might get points deducted? Does that laughter render meaningless the pain felt the day before? Fundamentally, does that have any bearing on someone's ability to work? I think not. The test ignores the complex reality of living with long-term or fluctuating conditions.

Many people have told us that they do not feel accurately represented by the reports written about them. Advisers have openly claimed that they see copy-and-paste jobs. A constituent read that they were apparently happy and confident during the assessment, when in fact they were crying and shaking. No wonder as many as 74% of ESA decisions are overturned at appeal, according to Citizens Advice. That, of course, is one of the consequences of using a private company to assess the medical conditions of people who need support. Not having people qualified in the condition or illness with which assessors are presented is also a huge issue.

It is claimed that Maximus incentivises health professionals through the number of reports they complete. Logic says that that could directly lead to a proliferation of inaccuracies. Ultimately, profit should not be made from ill health; it leads to corner cutting and misplaced priorities. To defend the marketisation of the process is obscene.

I am not sure whether the Government or Conservative Members realise just how truly terrified some people are of the brown envelope from the Department for Work and Pensions. They know that they will be forced through a long and extremely difficult process. They will have to attend an assessment, and the decision notice they receive about the outcome of their work capability assessments is often inaccurate and misleading, leading to a long and stressful appeal process of up to 18 months; that is 18 months without the entitlement that those people deserve and need.

The process exacerbates poor health, and the Government make things worse. When people, because of their physical or mental health condition, ask that their assessment be carried out at their home, the answer given is almost always no. My caseworkers and agencies have sent substantial evidence to private contractors to show that my constituents would have severe difficulty attending the assessment centre. The stock response is, "If the claimant can get to their GP or to the hospital, they can attend the assessment centre." How cold-hearted is that?

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend not agree that there is a difference between someone going to a location quite close to their home, which they are familiar with, and an assessment centre that may be many miles away and difficult to get to unless they have their own transport?

Laura Pidcock: That is right, and in a place like North West Durham, where we have an inadequate and expensive transport system, it is unjustifiable not to have assessments carried out at home if someone is feeling unwell and faces stress in having to go to that assessment.

If the person does manage to get to the assessment centre, the assessor uses that as evidence of their ability to travel, walk, sit comfortably and cope with social interactions. One person got in touch with me to say that they had to sit in the assessment centre waiting room in soaking wet clothes due to their incontinence issues. Is this a system anyone can really defend? Is anyone really comfortable with a private provider forcing people to attend assessments in pain and with worry, to be degraded by the DWP?

If a person is found fit for work when they are not, that can have a huge impact on their mental and financial wellbeing. It can have a direct impact on their entitlement to housing benefit and council tax benefit, plunging them into destitution, and resulting in increasing debt, risk of eviction and untold stress. People wrongly found fit for work are then expected to do job searches and training, and are even sanctioned. It came as no surprise to any of us Opposition Members that in 2016 the UN concluded that the Government had committed “grave and systematic violations” of the rights of people with disabilities. That report should have seen an end to the Government, but they limp on.

For people who do go on to win at appeal, reassessment is too frequent. No sooner have they won than they are being reassessed—even people with terminal illnesses have to endure that. Imagine the retriggering of mental health difficulties when people have to describe, in assessment after assessment, historical sexual abuse to which they were subject.

Let me mention some of the contributions from people who got in touch. One person said:

“The process feels like psychological rape, expressly designed to make you feel that you are the absolute property of the state, that you are not a human being and that your continued survival is basically an affront to society.”

Another said:

“When you are disabled, you are defined by the able-bodied by what you cannot do, rather than what you can do. No disabled person wants to be a burden on society. They want to be an active contributor but are denied this by society”,

and that

“The whole thing should be abolished as it’s a cruel and pointless exercise in ideology.”

It is about ideology, isn’t it? This system, with its complexities, its high thresholds and the way in which employment and support allowance and higher rates of universal credit have been denied to so many, cannot be seen outside the context of almost 10 years of austerity and budget cuts, which have literally taken money from people who are disabled, unwell or dying.

What are the worst consequences, the ultimate results, of this brutality? Jodey Whiting, who lived in Thornaby, not too far from my constituency, took her life 15 days after her benefits were stopped for missing a work capability assessment when seriously ill. The independent case examiner found multiple failings on the part of the DWP, including it simply not following its safeguarding procedures. Her mum, Joy Dove, is campaigning for an independent inquiry into benefit death and I am sure everyone on this side would say “All power to her” in that campaign.

Stephen Smith, aged 64, who had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, osteoarthritis and an enlarged prostate that left him in chronic pain, failed a work capability assessment in 2017, which meant that his employment

and support allowance payments were stopped. Anybody who saw Stephen’s emaciated body on social media will have been horrified. Stephen died last Monday. Jeff Hayward, who won his appeal seven months after his death, had a debilitating skin condition and spent his last 18 months fighting a “fit for work” decision. Michael O’Sullivan, aged 60, from north London had long-term mental health problems, and the coroner found that the benefit process was a key trigger for his death.

These are the real-life tragedies of a broken system. I do not think I can bear to hear the Minister say, yet again and as his predecessor did, that we should come to him with our individual problems with the system. They are not individual problems; they are systemic failings, and a consequence of privatising social security and making £37 billion in welfare cuts.

Let us be honest: this is institutionalised bullying and harassment of sick and disabled people. I have no doubt that administrative ineptitude is part of it, but when the issue is on this scale, there can be no other conclusion. By deliberately stripping people of their rights, in order to disrupt the welfare state and the very concept of legal entitlement, the Government have trodden all over the expectation of citizens that they will be looked after in their hour of need. And what for? To replace the state with private and family provision, to boost the coffers of private insurers, and to replace legal rights with charity, subject to moral judgments of deservingness.

It does not have to be like this. How can our social security system be about security and not about punishment? The Labour party has rightly committed to scrap the work capability assessment. That will be a big step forward and will no doubt be welcomed by disability rights groups and welfare rights agencies alike. In the meantime, why do the Government not start rectifying injustices in the system by taking the vast amount of evidence from medical professionals, including GPs, consultants and nurses, into account? Testimony should be fundamentally believed. The culture permeating the DWP is one of disbelief that looks cynically on those who request help. Stressful, face-to-face assessments should be used only if there is an absolute necessity, such as a lack of evidence on which to decide on entitlement. Assessments should be a last resort.

The system should be designed by people who are experts through experience. Experts who understand how conditions affect the ability to work should be employed. Any social security system that replaces the work capability assessment as it exists today should not be a functionality test with arbitrary rules that do not account for the fluctuating nature of a person’s condition, disability or illness. There needs to be a revision of the assessment criteria, so that they are linked much more closely to the real world of work, or the work that the person was doing. Knowing whether someone can move a carton of milk with one hand cannot allow us to understand a person’s comfort or ability to work in a specific environment. Any process should include an assessment of the additional support that person would need to ease them back into the workplace. Recording of assessments should be standard, unless a person asks not to be recorded. The Government are dragging their heels on that recommendation.

Private outsourcing of the assessments has to be scrapped. The market has failed all aspects of the social security system, placing company profit before the needs

[*Laura Pidcock*]

of the people interacting with the system. When will the Government understand that private enterprise and illness are incompatible, and inevitably lead to the injustices that we see today?

When people are dealing with the stresses of not being in full health and of needing support for their disability or mental health condition, they should fundamentally not be subject to further stress, degradation and even abuse by the state. The system should be designed on the presumption that people are telling the truth when they come to see the assessors. They should not be forced through a humiliating and exhausting process that often results in them winning appeals at tribunal, with the help of the excellent but underfunded advice agencies and many of our caseworkers. For many people, their last fight on this earth is not with their illness, but with the state, and that fact alone should lead us to scrap this dreadful system.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) for her moving and impressive speech. We will have an informal limit of seven minutes from now on. If right hon. and hon. colleagues could adhere to that, I would be grateful.

2.45 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on presenting the case so well, with the passion and belief that we all know she has for the subject.

To say that the difficulty with ESA and the transition to universal credit is evident in my constituency is a gross understatement. I have talked to the Minister about this on a number of occasions. His door has always been open and he has told me to bring any issues I have to him. I have done that, and found him responsive and helpful. I hope that at the end of the debate, when we have all made our contributions, the Minister will be able to address some of the issues that I and others have, and put our minds at ease.

The difficulties that people face are astronomical. My comments will not be a surprise to anyone here; I am known as a man with a very soft heart. When I look at a person who is clearly ill and vulnerable, who has tears in their eyes because they simply do not understand what is happening and feel that they are alone and helpless, it is hard not to be upset and angry for them at a system that puts so much stress and pressure on the most vulnerable in our society. I am all for getting people up and out to work, giving training and helping to build and boost confidence to start a job. I do not want to see one able person out of work in Strangford, but in seeking to weed out the few who could work but will not, we are mentally exhausting and physically injuring those who are not capable of working.

I want to give an example that exemplifies all my comments. My staff recently dealt with the case of a young man who was living in his car. It became clear to me that this young man was broken; there is no other way to describe it. I called my parliamentary aide into the meeting. She is a sympathetic person and she had

her arm around him, telling him that he was important, that he mattered and that we would help him get a fresh start. This was definitely a man on the edge, whose only companion was his dog. I do not know how he got to that position or what mistakes he had made, but I do not need to know that; I just needed him to know that we would help him.

We spoke to the phenomenally helpful Elizabeth, who is the manageress at our local jobcentre, who worked her way through the issues with his benefits and helped him. He could not face people, so he was outside the system. We had to take him and do everything for him. We spoke to the housing executive who managed to sort out hostel accommodation for him in the short term and now he has his own flat; that all happened at the meeting we had.

We spoke to the local food bank, based at Thriving Life Church in Newtownards, who provided him with food and sanitary products. We spoke to all these people. He was so low and so down that he could not have spoken to them because he had not got the ability to socially interact with people. We spoke because he could not speak for himself. The staff in my office were able to help him and get him out of the dark hole that he was in.

When I think of this young man—a man who could not even look us in the eye that day, who I knew was on the precipice, at the point of no return, and was expected to work in that state, with no mercy shown—I am reminded of the role that we have in this House. As MPs, we are blessed and privileged to represent those people and to try to help them in the times when they need help.

There are too many people living in their cars who cannot get a break and do not know where to turn. Too many people have been pushed to the edge of darkness and feel alone, and that tells me that we need more Elizabeths and Lees in our jobcentres. We need more Owens and Irenes in our housing executives. We need more Natalies and Susannes in our food banks. Those people could not wave a magic wand to make it all okay, but they played their part to see this young man, over a few weeks, into a position where he could look me in the eye and thank me. What a turnaround that was!

Unfortunately, that was only one example. In that three-week period, there were a number of people who were under the radar, who had slipped out of touch with the benefits office and were not in touch with the Executive or with others. We need to task all civil service staff with the fact that compassion is as much a qualification as an English GCSE.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions compassion, but is it not also correct that there must be professionalism? Linda Hending in my constituency set up a support group for people with myalgic encephalomyelitis. She found that, while 10 of those 11 people had either been found fit for work or had insufficient points for the Personal independent payment, all those decisions had been overturned on appeal. While it is inevitable that there will need to be some assessment, is it not critically important that those decisions are got right the first time, so that people do not have to go through the strain of an appeal, even if it is successful in the long term?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I have a number of girls in my office, and one in particular who does nothing but benefits. She works full time on ESAs, PIPs and DLAs as the turnover goes for income support and all those other things. She works full time on benefits, and the other staff fit in work with that as well. We win a number of appeals because of the advice that is given. To be fair to the Minister, I have suggested to him that we need staff who are professional and able to advise in the way they should.

Yes, there are those who take advantage—I know that that happens sometimes—but I want to talk about those who need the help. Ten years into this, I still do not think we have the balance right, and that is part of many people's mental health struggles. In the short time that I have, I want to mention that we need compassion for those with cancer who are claiming universal credit. Alongside the physical and emotional impacts, cancer brings with it a real risk of financial hardship. Macmillan Cancer Support has found that four out of five people with cancer are, on average, £570 a month worse off because of their diagnosis. Last year, Macmillan's support line advisers received 26,500 calls from people seeking advice on applying for universal credit.

The first problem is access: people who are hospitalised often do not have access to the internet, and navigating a long and complex online application form is a horrendous thing to go through at a time when their body will not let them attend to it. Those who are undergoing treatment or have a terminal diagnosis have also had to attend the jobcentre, which can be distressing, and in some cases go against medical advice.

The initial five-week waiting time for universal credit is causing problems for people with cancer, many of whom have had to give up their work completely due to their condition and treatment. That even applies to people with a terminal illness, meaning that people who may have less than six months to live now spend more than one month of those six waiting for their benefits. Under the old system, people with a terminal illness could expect to get paid as soon as their claim was processed. The Minister knows, because I have spoken to him about it, but I believe we need to address these delays. Some 67% of people are not receiving their full payment on time.

This year, the Government will pilot the managed migration of people to universal credit. It is welcome that this process will be piloted before Parliament is asked to make a final decision; I welcome that and it is good that we have that process, but it will not solve the problems for people already receiving universal credit. We need to do this better, for everyone's sake. I look to the Minister at this point: we need a sea-change of attitude, with compassion at its heart, working its way from this place to every level of public service. Young men such as Michael and others will simply not survive without it.

2.53 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I reiterate the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on an excellent speech, outlining some of the range of problems that we have with this work capability assessment process.

This feels like *déjà vu*: we are here, yet again, to argue that the current system of work capability assessment is not fit for purpose. We can use the latest available data that tells us that nearly three out of every four claimants who appeal their assessment decision telling them that they are fit for work will have the decision overturned. We can reference the five reviews of work capability assessment over the past 10 years, which have repeatedly raised problems with the assessment process, ranging from medical reports being mislaid to blatant lies in assessment reports. We can look at the Work and Pensions Committee's report from last year on ESA and PIP assessments, which saw an unprecedented 3,500 individuals share their experience and what they had been through, as my hon. Friend described.

We can discuss the death rates for people on ESA and, before that, on incapacity benefit. In 2013 that death rate was 4.3 times that of the general population, increasing from 3.6 times in 2003. That shows the level of sickness and ill health of people in this group. As has already been said, this is a poorly group of people who deserve to be listened to and respected. We can talk about the peer-reviewed research that estimated that between 2010 and 2013, work capability assessment was independently associated with an additional 590 suicides, 280,000 cases of self-reported ill health and 725,000 additional antidepressant scripts.

However, anyone watching this debate will be thinking, "What on earth is the point?", because to date the Government have taken not a jot of notice. Little has changed. We know how this is affecting people, as we have already heard: people living in fear and dread of the envelope dropping on their doormat, inviting them for their work capability assessment.

The Government have said they want to amalgamate the work capability assessment and PIP assessments by 2021. They say they want a more personalised approach and will involve disabled people in this process. I ask the Minister which disabled people's organisations have been involved in the decisions. I appreciate that charities may have been involved, and it is important that they be involved, but what DPOs and disabled people have been involved? Were they involved in the decision to put the contracts for this new assessment process out to tender? That has already happened; we had one week, and then the contract for this new process went out to tender.

What are the Government going to do in the meantime, while this Government-orchestrated harm—it is a Government policy—continues? I am really concerned, and I hope the Minister can respond, because to date there has been little but warm words and platitudes.

As we have heard, on Monday we learned that Stephen Smith, the Liverpool man whose emaciated body was reminiscent of someone found in a concentration camp, not in 21st-century Britain, had died as a result of multiple organ failure after being found fit for work. We know he is not the first. My hon. Friend mentioned Jeff Hayward, who died in 2018 of a heart attack, seven months before a tribunal overturned a decision that he was fit for work.

Also in 2018, Jimmy Ballentine committed suicide after being found fit for work, as did Amy Nice, Kevin Dooley and Brian Bailey. Jodey Whiting, my hon. Friend's constituent, Elaine Morrall, Daniella Obeng and Brian Sycamore all committed suicide in 2017 as a result of being found fit for work. In July 2017, Mark Scholfield,

[Debbie Abrahams]

a terminal cancer patient, received no universal credit before he died, in spite of his illness. Chris Gold, in 2017, was found fit for work following a stroke. He was facing foreclosure when he died as he could not work. Lawrence Bond died in 2017, collapsing and dying on the street after being found fit for work.

Julia Kelly committed suicide in 2015, as did Ben McDonald. Chris Smith, who had terminal cancer, was found fit for work right up until his death. David Clapson died in 2014, as did Michael Connolly. “George, from Chesterfield” died that year as the result of a heart attack, again after being found fit for work. Robert Barlow, another terminal claimant, died after losing his ESA. David Barr, Trevor Drakard, Shaun Pilkington and Terry McGarvey also died in 2014. Lee Robinson, Robert Christian, Jacqueline Harris, Nicholas Peter Barker and David Groves died in 2013.

That is not an exhaustive list, but those names are an indictment of this Government and their policy, and so is the lack of change that has happened as a result of those deaths. There needs to be an independent inquiry, as Jodey Whiting’s mother says, into the deaths of claimants found fit for work. Until then, there should be a moratorium on all reassessments; for new assessments, as has been said, medical evidence should be the primary data used, not the blatantly flawed assessment processes.

Sir Henry, I am sure you agree that any Government’s first duty is to protect their citizens, but our disabled citizens have been spectacularly failed by this Government. Like millions of people across the country, I condemn the attacks in Sri Lanka, and I share concerns about the emergency that is climate change, but the deaths of disabled people as a result of Government policy are nothing less than a scandal. I challenge each and every one of us, in this room and outside, to rise and say to the Government, “Enough is enough!”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. I thank the hon. Lady very much for her moving speech. We will have to put a six-minute voluntary limit on subsequent speeches.

3 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I thank the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) for securing the debate. I pay tribute to my parliamentary casework team, and to Citizens Advice and Money Matters, local organisations that work with the casework team to ensure that people who are going through the ESA and PIP system or who have other issues get their social security. The assistance that they provide to my constituents is invaluable. Without those organisations, it is quite clear that more people would suffer.

I will confine my observations to a Work and Pensions Committee report. As a member of that Committee, I can say that, such was the level of interest in PIP and ESA assessments, 200 organisations submitted evidence and there were 3,500 individual submissions. That tells

us more than anything else the level of interest, and the pain and suffering that people are going through as a result of these assessments.

Let us look at the Department’s own statistics. There have been 3.1 million ESA applications, with 1.7 million assessments completed, but with payments and awards issued to only 1 million people. That suggests low confidence and trust in the assessment system. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) quite rightly said that it is important that the Department and the assessment process are correct first time. However, that is not the experience of far too many people, which is why I am delighted to take part in this debate secured by the hon. Member for North West Durham.

The simple fact is that claimants can have multiple health conditions, which can mean that they have severe limitations. There was a recommendation to commission and publish independent research on the impact of the application and assessment processes of both ESA and PIP on claimants’ health. Will the Minister tell us whether the Department accepted that recommendation and will take it forward?

Claims are often made by telephone, Sir Henry, and you and others will be aware that one campaign I launched since I got here was to abolish the telephone tax. I am delighted to say that the Government finally listened, and that the telephone tax was abolished. It is ludicrous to suggest that it should cost claimants phoning a telephone helpline 55p a minute, and I am delighted that that has now gone. However, as a result of health conditions, there are claimants who require communications in specific formats—I think particularly of those with hearing impairments—and we need to make sure that there are other methods for them to apply for ESA or PIP and the like. I hope that the Minister will update us on that.

The hon. Member for North West Durham was absolutely right on home visits. Maximus told the Select Committee that decisions on any request for home visits that they would carry out would be based on medical fact, not medical opinion. I hope that the Minister will say a bit about the guidelines on home visits that the Department gives to assessors. That brings us to the assessors and their knowledge; they can have partial knowledge or no knowledge at all of specific conditions. I still remember asking Maximus and Atos who a claimant with multiple sclerosis and a history of depression would see if they were to visit an assessment centre. The answer came back that they would see a general occupational therapist. If the assessment process is to have that conditionality, which I personally oppose, claimants must see people at the assessment centre with some knowledge or expertise on specific conditions.

We really need to improve understanding among healthcare and social care professionals and claimants about what constitutes good evidence, including measures, monitoring and reporting, and the supply of evidence. For far too many people, the assessment process has become a lottery. I agree with the recording of assessments, because we really need to end the mistrust around assessments. The fact is that appeals are upheld based on oral evidence given at the original assessment, not at the appeal. That is why recording is a must, and I hope the Minister will tell us that there has been progress on that.

A full copy of the report should be given, to increase transparency, and the quality of reports really must improve. We have contractors who have not once hit their targets for acceptable reports. If they cannot hit that target, we have to ask why they were given the contracts in the very first place. If a contractor failed to hit targets in any other part of the public sector, they would have that contract taken off them. I hope that the Minister can tell us what feedback and quality control measures the Department has put in place, because far too many people are suffering under this system. We have to ensure that it improves. I am delighted that the Scottish Government will do away with private contractors to undertake assessments. The Westminster parties should consider that too.

3.7 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing the debate and on the excellent way in which she introduced it, covering a range of issues. I felt compelled to speak because many of my experiences with constituents are similar to those we have heard. I have received the clear message—I hope the Minister receives it as well—that improvements to the assessments process are very much needed.

Some constituents who have attended assessments have raised concerns with me about the fact that assessors carry out the assessments very quickly and do not listen to their answers. We have touched on the refusal to conduct home assessments, sometimes despite medical evidence that they are necessary. On one occasion, a constituent suffering from agoraphobia was refused a home assessment. Surely the need for one in that situation was obvious.

I note from an overview of the work capability assessment mandatory reconsideration and appeals process that, from October 2013 to June 2018, 33% of assessments were closed by the claimant. That is 1.3 million people—not a trifling number. The Government line may be that all those people pulled out of the process because they were fit to work, but I doubt it is as simple as that. My worry is that there are people within that 1.3 million who would be entitled to ESA but did not go through with the process because they were too anxious or worried about the assessment or because they simply could not cope with the idea of having to discuss their intimate medical issues with a stranger. I would like to know from the Minister whether any research has been done into those 1.3 million people, the reasons why they withdrew and whether people in genuine need have been failed.

The study goes on to say that 15% of all applicants go on to register a mandatory reconsideration, which is 370,000 people within that five-year period. Some 85% of those reconsiderations stick with the original decision, and 21% of those people then go on to submit a formal appeal. There is sometimes a misconception that the mandatory consideration is the appeal stage, and that there are no further opportunities to challenge. However, those who carry on to launch an appeal have a success rate, according to these figures, of 63%, although we heard from my hon. Friend that, according to the CAB, it is more like 74% or 75%.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): My office team has experience of constituents challenging assessments and getting nowhere until they come to our office and we get a reconsideration straightaway, which gives the impression that they are not taken seriously. It is the exact same evidence, but they are not listened to until we get involved. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a sad state of affairs?

Justin Madders: I find that disappointing, but not surprising. The fact that the appeals success rate is so high suggests that not only the initial assessment is flawed, but the mandatory reconsideration stage is not a proper appraisal of the full merits. Perhaps that takes place only when Members of Parliament get involved. A cynical view would be that the mandatory reconsideration stage is just a hurdle put in front of people to make life a little more difficult for them. I am shocked that recent figures for the appeal stage show that the DWP does not even bother to turn up to about 80% of the appeal hearings.

I want to pay tribute to my fantastic local CAB, which represents people at the appeal hearings. However, it cannot help everyone, and it is the people who are not able to get representation I worry about.

Given my constituents' experiences, there is no doubt that the original assessments are flawed. Many decisions are overturned at tribunal, and it seems the system does not learn from its mistakes. For example, one constituent was assessed five times in eight years of being on ESA. At each assessment she was found fit for work. On each occasion she appealed and on each occasion she won that appeal. In the process she paid £150 to get medical evidence to support her appeals. How can the assessment process get it wrong five times? How can the absolute waste of public money that five separate appeals must have cost be justified when the final decision was the same every time? What does it say about the Government's approach to people with long-term conditions? How many times does someone have to prove that they are ill and unable to work?

Last-minute cancellations have also been an issue. I have heard from constituents whose assessments have been cancelled on the day the assessment is due to take place, and in some cases the constituents were actually at the assessment centre when their appointment was cancelled. That seems to be particularly the case when the assessment is scheduled for a time after half past three. The most recent example involved a lady who was struggling when entering the assessment centre. Obviously, it is a very stressful experience. She was shaking, crying and not engaging, and then she was told that her assessment would be delayed by another 45 minutes, at which point she became so distressed that she had to leave the centre and cancel the appointment. That is a callous and uncaring way to treat someone. When one of my constituents rang up two days before her assessment to give notice that she would not be well enough to attend, she was told that it was too late for the assessment to be rescheduled and she would be recorded as a no show. It is double standards of the highest order.

In conclusion, people with long-term conditions deserve compassion, respect and support. They should not be made to feel they are on trial because they are ill.

3.13 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this debate and on the tone that she set at the beginning.

I was first elected in 2015 and I have spoken out repeatedly about the damage that the assessments and the way in which they are carried out do to my constituents and constituents across the United Kingdom. Although I am glad to speak in this debate, I am really annoyed that it is necessary, because it should not be. The Minister is not hearing anything today of which he is not aware. He knows exactly what is going on and it is not acceptable that we come back time after time to say the same things over and over. I know the Minister will tell us about changes that have been made and about people who are not reassessed if they have got a severe disability or a lifelong illness. He will tell us that people with progressive conditions requiring a high level of support will be assessed only every 10 years. I say to him that that is all very well and good, but it simply is not good enough.

The Disability Benefits Consortium, made up of 80 different charities and organisations, has stated that it did not think assessors had sufficient expertise to carry out assessments. Respondents who had seen a copy of their paperwork following assessment said that it “badly” or “very badly” reflected the answers that they gave. We all know that to be true when we speak to our constituents. Citizens Advice has told us that 81% of its advisers report inaccuracies in work capability assessments, so the information is out there. It is in our constituencies and in our surgeries, and I know it will be in the Minister’s inbox as well.

Constituents in a state of extreme distress have told me that they felt the questions they were being asked at the assessments were extremely intimate, invasive and inappropriate. Discussing very intimate details of your medical challenges with a panel of strangers in a context that causes the claimant distress and nervousness very often sets back the claimant’s health, exacerbating their condition, and all of that is before they are told, often incorrectly, that they are fit for work, with the paperwork not accurately reflecting the answers that the claimant gave at the assessment.

Some 51% of ESA claimants are recorded as having a mental or behavioural disorder as their main disabling condition. Rethink Mental Illness has published a report that states:

“Assessments can be traumatising and anxiety-inducing”

in a system that requires claimants to

“collect their own medical evidence”,

and it

“inherently discriminates against people with mental illnesses”.

Often a false sense of security is created where assessors appear friendly and ask questions supposedly by way of a preamble to the formal interview: “Do you have pets?” “Do you have a dog?” “Do you walk it?” “What lovely weather we’re having.” “Do you like to sit in the garden?” All the questions are asked as if it is casual conversation, only for the claimant to subsequently discover, upon receiving his or her paperwork, that their

assessment decision has been reached on the basis of answers to the so-called casual questions instead of on the medical evidence presented. I think that is sinister.

Danielle Rowley: The hon. Lady is making an important point. I have a constituent who was asked if they could get a pen out of their bag, and they did, and then that was put down in the assessment. She was in floods of tears at my surgery because she felt she had been tricked. It is just awful.

Patricia Gibson: A false sense is presented to the people, some very vulnerable, when they go to the assessments, and it is simply not good enough. The simple fact is that the system—the Minister knows this—which is a partnership with the private sector that has been in place since 2008, brought in under Labour, opened the gates, but the Minister has to understand that it has opened the gates to a place where folk who are sick and disabled are commodified, and it is not working.

Nearly half of women involved in work capability benefit tests have attempted suicide. We have seen the reports of claimants being asked, “Why haven’t you killed yourself?”, and even a double amputee being told he was no longer eligible for the mobility aspect of his disability living allowance. Sadly, such stories continue to emerge, and we have heard today about the very sad case of Stephen Smith, with which I am sure the Minister is familiar.

I have heard DWP Ministers say—I cannot remember whether this includes the Minister here today—the number of successful appeals against decisions shows that the system is working. I must confess I have never heard such stuff and nonsense. The number of successful appeals shows that too many incorrect decisions are made, which deny the most vulnerable in society, the sick and infirm, the support that they need and deserve. That is why the Scottish Government are committed to taking a lead on obtaining medical evidence so that claimants are not burdened with it. That is why there will be no private sector involvement in assessments, so that there will be no profit motive for it to declare claimants fit for work when it is not in a payment-by-results system. That is why the Scottish Government say that claimants will be offered a location and time and date that suits them for assessment, with home visits for those with travel difficulties, and that is why they have said audio recordings of assessments will be standard to ensure accuracy and transparency.

I urge the Minister and the Government to step up and admit that the current system punishes those who are unfit to work and those who are sick, and cruelly strips them of their dignity. I hope that the Minister will admit that it does not work. I urge him to look at the measures that the Scottish Government will implement and take a leaf out of that particular book. The current system does not work for my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran. It does not work for anyone’s constituents. I ask the Minister to do the right thing: reach out a compassionate hand to those living with a disability. Anyone who is a Minister for Disabled People should do no less.

3.19 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this

important debate. The work capability assessment was introduced for employment and support allowance claimants in 2008. It has also been used to reassess incapacity benefit claimants and determine eligibility for additional universal credit support. It is now more than a decade since the introduction of the assessment: a good time to reflect on the impact that it has had on the lives of claimants across the country.

From 2008 to 2017, 48% of all work capability assessment outcomes were successfully appealed in Scotland and nearly half of all fit-for-work outcomes reached through work capability assessments were also overturned. In my constituency, 47% of appeals were successful in overturning the outcomes of such assessments and almost half of all fit-for-work outcomes reached through them were successfully appealed. The most recent national figures released by the DWP highlight the fact that 65% of fit-for-work outcomes were overturned in the period from December 2017 to January 2019.

Those figures illustrate the negative impact of work capability assessments on claimants, and the fact that they are failing, because they find people fit to work when they are clearly incapable of working. Claimants in that situation have to go through the appeals process with no access to their ESA payments, which means that they face poverty or destitution, or making a claim for jobseeker's allowance or universal credit while waiting for their appeal to be processed. Considering the problems that there have been with universal credit, such as the five-week wait for the first payment, that is unacceptable. Many people face financial hardship and further uncertainty simply because they have challenged a work capability assessment outcome. Another thing to reflect on is the fact that ESA appeals are currently subject to a clearance time of 30 weeks.

Work capability assessments have also led to a situation where vulnerable claimants are denied the support that they need. The latest DWP figures show that 68% of those suffering from injury were found fit for work; 59% of those living with connective tissue diseases and 40% of those with mental or behaviour disorders were also found fit for work. How can the Government claim to be building a fairer society when work capability assessments are pushing the most vulnerable people into work in spite of their disabilities and medical conditions? It is clear that the assessments are not fit for purpose.

That view is shared by disability charities and the Work and Pensions Committee, whose 2017 inquiry received more than 3,000 letters from individuals who shared their experiences of the assessment process. More than 100 people reported that they or someone they cared for had experienced suicidal feelings as a result of the assessment process. We have heard today that people have taken their own lives. Shame!

Others highlighted a mismatch between what they had told assessors about their conditions and the content included in the assessor's written report. In response, the Work and Pensions Committee made recommendations designed to improve the assessment process, including recording face-to-face assessments and providing clearer guidance to claimants about submitting evidence to support their claims. Similar recommendations have also been made by organisations such as Citizens Advice. The Government's response was to ignore the recommendations.

The Secretary of State might be striking the right tone, but actions speak louder than words, and the problem with work capability assessments cannot be hidden through merging them with PIP assessments. Disability Rights UK summed up the shortcomings of the Government's approach:

"You can't merge two badly constructed processes and expect to come up with one fit-for-purpose approach".

How right that is. For as long as the Government refuse to make real changes to the assessment process, vulnerable people will continue to be denied the help that they need.

It is shameful that this Government have extended Maximus's contract to carry out work capability assessments until 2021. The company has maximised its profits through work capability assessments despite the clear evidence that claimants have been denied access to the support they need. I am glad that private companies will be banned from carrying out assessments in the new Scottish devolved social security system, thanks to pressure from Scottish Labour. It is about time that claimants were treated with dignity and respect by the Government.

3.24 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing the debate, and on her excellent speech.

My office was involved in a work capability tribunal case last Wednesday and I have obtained permission from the person involved to discuss publicly what she has gone through because of such assessments. Sophie is the daughter of a friend of mine. Her mum and I trained 20 years ago as nurses and we worked all those years together on a ward at Lincoln County Hospital, so I know her really well. I provided Sophie with a letter for her tribunal, as her MP, as a qualified nurse and as someone who has known her for 20 years, before and after her diagnosis of multiple sclerosis.

Sophie tries hard to live as normal a life as she can, but I have seen how her illness affects her ability to do that day to day. She is just 30 years old and she was diagnosed with relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis at the age of 16 when she first developed balance difficulties. Over the following years she has developed problems with weakness, particularly on the right side of her body, as well as urinary difficulties, pain, fatigue and visual problems. She uses a wheelchair and struggles with mobility.

We went on a hen weekend in February; Sophie is my friend's best friend, and we were in Boston. Everywhere we went she was in a wheelchair, and she simply cannot get out and about on her own. Whereas some patients with relapsing MS are unaffected between attacks, Sophie has chronic symptoms and is affected by her MS every day. The symptoms fluctuate markedly, and even mild infections and changes in temperature can make things much worse. There were complications during a trial treatment—I remember Alison and I and a few of us looked really hard to try to get her on trials to control what she had. There was a drug called alemtuzumab. Sophie now has an overactive thyroid and has to have regular blood tests to monitor her blood levels of thyroxine.

[Karen Lee]

Sophie left school at 18 and trained as a nursery nurse. She worked at a nursery. She loved that job; it was one of her bits of normal. Eventually, though, she had to give up her job because of her MS, and after being forced by her disability to do that she applied for employment and support allowance benefits.

Recently, after a medical review, Sophie was deemed fit to work. The reasons given were that she has no problem with balance, uses public transport on her own and takes herself places independently. The truth is that she wears a support on one of her legs at all times, as I saw when we stayed for the weekend in February, because she drags the leg as she walks. She has to use a wheelchair every time she goes out of the house. She cannot walk any but short distances indoors, so how she is supposed to use public transport is totally beyond me.

The person who completed the assessment was allegedly competent to do it. Yet at the tribunal last week, those hearing the evidence seemed surprised that the case ever got as far as a tribunal and dismissed it in less than 10 minutes. They said something about a level 2 out of 3; I do not understand the terminology—but that is how ill Sophie is, although she had been deemed fit to work.

When someone is deemed fit to work, the process is that they have to appeal the decision if they feel it is wrong. Sophie appealed, but her appeal was dismissed because, I am told, the only evidence that the DWP will consider is the examination on the day, which came to such worryingly inaccurate conclusions. Sophie was therefore forced to take her case to a tribunal. That was eventually successful, but she should never have been put through such an anxiety-inducing ordeal. She is pregnant—she has a little boy of two and is about eight months pregnant, and the assessment came on top of all those other things in her life. I am sorry—it gets really upsetting, because I know her and what has happened to her is disgusting.

For people like Sophie it feels as if the DUP—*[Interruption.]*—I am sorry. That was a Freudian slip, and I meant no offence. It feels as if the DWP is working backwards from the conclusion that they are fit to work, regardless of the severity of their disability. That practice must end. Support must be given to the most vulnerable in society.

It has become popular in recent years to demonise those who are forced to claim benefits—to label them as somehow being scroungers or as faking their disability. Just after Christmas, I watched “I, Daniel Blake” on TV, and a prominent Conservative MP said on Twitter that it is only a film, but actually it mirrors real life, and people need to realise that. It is high time that the Government woke up to the fact that the vulnerable in society are suffering because of what they have done to our welfare system. It is meant to be the safety net for those who need it. People say that the mark of a decent society is how it looks after its vulnerable people. I am sorry, Sir Henry, but at present the reality is that the system is broken.

3.29 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for North

West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this important debate, and on her consistent opposition to measures introduced by this Government that are calculated to push people in financial hardship further into poverty. She has been a genuinely welcome Member of the House; we need more people who are as passionate and who have that integrity to stand up for their constituents. I stand with her in opposition to the work capability assessment, and agree that the whole system needs to be redrawn.

I welcome the Minister to his new post, and I hope he will continue—as he has done—to listen to views from across the House, including suggestions about how to reshape the system so that it works better for people. I appreciate that that is a tall order because, with all due respect to the civil servants, his Department has probably had the fastest revolving door for Ministers of any Government Department, although they have all had a fairly mixed tenure. Without the work of the civil servants to keep things running, this Government would come to a standstill.

The hon. Lady highlighted the impact of work capability assessments and their tragic, life-ending consequences. That gets to the heart of today’s debate, and that is why the Government must take action—the consequences are too significant. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) rightly paid tribute to our parliamentary and constituency staff, as well as to Money Matters, Citizens Advice, and all those charities and organisations that work with people on a daily basis. These vulnerable people in our society require our support. The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), who I had not heard speak before, made an emotional speech that went to the heart of this debate and reminded us of the emotion and humanity surrounding this issue. We do our jobs day in, day out, but this issue is affecting people’s lives.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) rightly said that a Labour Government introduced this policy, but he should not take all the credit for the social security system in Scotland, as a few other people had a hand in it as well. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) highlighted the damaging impact of this system, and the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk)—he is no longer in his place—said that we need to get this right first time. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said that by using the private sector we are simply passing the buck, but it is our responsibility to get this right.

The number of appeals against decisions made during work capability assessments is testament to the fact that the system does not work. I could recount the statistics, but the Minister will then stand up and tell me contrary figures, and I do not want to swap statistics any more on this matter. This is about real people’s lives, and unlike the revolving door of Ministers, and unlike the different Governments who have presided over this policy, it is time that we took responsibility and got the issue right, rather than kicking it even further down the road.

MPs have supported constituents through the mandatory reconsideration process, and our staff have had to deal with that consuming and emotionally draining process. Ultimately, however, this is about the people affected, and the devastating impact that the process has on

individual lives when we get it wrong. It takes such a long time to overturn a decision that we fail to recognise the significant consequences of that decision on individuals.

The Work and Pensions Committee made a number of suggestions in 2017, and noted the flaws in the assessment process. People were being asked “medically inappropriate questions”, and there was a mismatch between what assessors heard and what was written in their reports. Some assessors overlooked certain aspects of disabilities or illnesses, including mental illness and conditions such as fibromyalgia or ME. Such conditions can be deceptive, and medical professionals who have not seen them before can often miss them, and we must therefore consider those severe flaws in the process.

As I said in a previous debate, I was invited to witness an acted out version of an assessment. If I am honest, I found the whole thing a bit ridiculous because it took an hour and a half, although I was told at the start that it would take 40 minutes. It felt as if I was having a wee play performed for me about how the process would work in an ideal world, but in reality that is not how things work. That is not the experience of my constituents or those people we have heard about today.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) named many individual cases. Tragically, there are many more examples of people who have ended their lives as a result of this process. These are vulnerable people, and we have a responsibility to do more. With all due respect to the Minister, I know he will stand up and restate the Government line. That is fine, but it does nothing for people who are sitting at home right now and going through this process.

The Government have announced plans to combine the assessment processes, but I am not sure how much comfort that will bring to my constituents, or any of the people we have heard about today. It is true that they might not have to go through repeated questions and the needless extra stress of multiple examinations, but they will still have to go through the assessment process and the devil will be in the detail. Many disabled people receive only one kind of benefit, so I see no real benefit to that solution, which is the only one on the table right now.

I call on the Minister to get this right. I am tired of coming to Westminster Hall, on any given day of the week or time, to hear another new Minister who will not last very long and has not really managed to get any further down the road. I hope this Minister will be different, and I call on him to listen to the voices in this House, take action and do something.

3.36 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this debate. I thank all organisations that have provided briefings for it, and commend the excellent campaigning work of so many disabled activists, including those from Disabled People Against Cuts, who have shown that through direct action, our voices can be heard. I welcome the Minister to his new post, and I, too, hope he lasts longer than his predecessors. I look forward to working with him to try to make a difference.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham made an excellent opening speech that highlighted the flaws in the unfit-for-purpose assessment framework, and the inadequacies of the assessment. She eloquently described the impact of poor decision making, and the flaws in the process that so many individuals have to go through. These ill and disabled people have to endure weeks, if not months on end, of waiting to receive the vital social security support to which they are entitled. She rightly highlighted the damning report from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which stated that this Government have caused a systematic violation of the rights of disabled people. She also highlighted the harrowing experiences of so many people, which I will come on to later in my speech.

This afternoon hon. Members from across the House have shared their testimonies and paid tribute to their casework teams. We MPs are picking up a lot of this casework. We heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Lincoln (Karen Lee), and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), and from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), to name just a few.

Ten years on from its introduction, the unfit-for-purpose assessment continues to cause unnecessary harm. I admit that the work capability assessment was flawed from its inception, in that it fails to assess a person's ability to work, instead relying on a series of functional descriptors that do not reflect the real world of work or the barriers to it. Under the coalition Government in 2012, WCA criteria were revised and the descriptors changed, making the test more restrictive. Once assessed, a person was placed in one of two groups: limited capability for work, or limited capability for work and work-related activity. In 2017, however, the Government did the unthinkable and abolished the work-related activity group component for employment and support allowance and universal credit. That denied nearly 500,000 ill and disabled people almost £30 per week, and chose to ignore the additional costs and distance from the labour market that are faced by ill and disabled people.

All hon. Members here have mentioned the outsourcing of assessments. Since 2010, more than £1 billion has been paid to private contractors, including Atos and Maximus, which have repeatedly failed, even by the DWP's own performance standards. Despite those failures, the DWP recently announced that it will be extending the contract for Maximus until 2021. Does the Minister not agree that instead of extending the contract for a further 16 months, it is about time that we ended the privatisation of the assessments and brought them back in-house? I also ask the Minister to publish the contract and its terms, and how much it is going to cost, as his predecessor promised.

Members have told heartbreaking stories about the failures of the outsourced assessments, such as that of Larry Newman, who was assessed by Atos, was awarded zero points, and died of lung problems soon after. Healthcare professionals are asking inappropriate and offensive questions, and are compiling inaccurate reports. Citizens Advice says that 81% of its advisers have seen assessment reports that contain inaccuracies.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Marsha De Cordova: I am sorry; I have to keep going.

The flawed WCA has led to inaccurate and poor decision making. Some 74% of decisions on ESA are overturned at appeal, but less than a quarter of ESA cases are overturned at mandatory reconsideration. As a result, many are forced to go to appeal tribunals, which, according to Citizens Advice, have an average waiting time of 30 weeks. That is 30 weeks without vital social security support. In 2017, the DWP spent £120 million challenging the cases at appeal tribunals. When will the Minister act to address the failure of the mandatory reconsideration stage?

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham mentioned all the cases that drop out of the system before even getting to mandatory reconsideration or appeal stage. Do we record that information? If not, does the Minister not agree that it is time to start recording and calculating the number of people who are falling out of the system? Will the Minister also share how much it costs to administer ESA appeals?

It is good that the ESA65B letter will be revised for the summer. Will the Minister pause any further distribution of those letters to GPs?

Perhaps the biggest failure of the work capability assessment lies in its role as a cause of and contributor to mental distress for ill and disabled people. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth listed all the people who took their life in 2017. This is just not good enough. The Government recently revealed that 5,690 people died six months after being found fit for work. That is unacceptable. These are people like Stephen Smith, who was found fit for work, despite having multiple illnesses. He died last week, and we send our condolences to his family and friends, because this is not an acceptable situation. There is no stronger indictment of a failing system than thousands dying months after being denied vital social security support—the support that is supposed to be the safety net for the most vulnerable in our society.

It is time to scrap the failing system. It is not time to merge or integrate ESA, universal credit and personal independence payments. As long as two assessments are deeply flawed, combining them will only expose individuals to the risk of two adverse decisions as opposed to one.

This is a cruel and callous assessment framework, which has created a hostile environment for disabled people. Labour, disabled people and disabled people's organisations are clear that we need to scrap the work capability assessment immediately and replace it with an assessment framework that treats disabled people with the dignity and respect that they deserve. We need to end this hostile environment.

3.44 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry; you have expertly managed the timekeeping. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock). I know this is an area that she has campaigned on since she was first elected, and she does so with real passion and a determination to see improvements right across the system. That was echoed by all speakers. I might not have agreed with absolutely every point—hon. Members would not expect me to—but it is clear that there is a

real desire to see continued improvement and an emphasis on how important that improvement is to people who are going through the process.

The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) highlighted a particular story, which I was very touched by. I would like to meet her to discuss it further, as I think there are lessons to be learned from that case. I am certainly sorry for the experience that person has gone through.

This area is a real priority for me. I have been the Minister for Disabled People before, when I was a Parliamentary Under-Secretary. I have been an elected representative for 19 years, so I recognise the comments—we see first-hand through our casework instances where things have not gone right. I have spent my parliamentary career being proactive, working with MPs across the House, and stakeholders, charities and experts in this area. I listen to what is said, I try to do my best to make improvements and I certainly hope that that was reflected in my record as Minister for Disabled People last time. I will continue in the same vein.

The Government are focused on this area, and we have rightly increased funding for those with disabilities and long-term health conditions. This year, we are expected to spend £55 billion, which is a £10 billion increase in real terms since we came to office. It is a record high and it is 2.5% of GDP, which is higher than the spend of any other G7 country. It is 6% of total Government spending, and I think every penny is rightly supported by the wider public.

The debate today is focused on the 10-year anniversary of the work capability assessment, which I note a few speakers did acknowledge was introduced by the last Labour Government. Clearly, it was not perfect and there has been much-needed improvement since its introduction. We are all committed to playing our part in improving the process and to taking account of the developments in healthcare, modern workplaces and flexible working arrangements.

Backing up those improvements were the five independent reviews. The first three were carried out by Professor Harrington and the final two were carried out by Dr Litchfield. More than 100 recommendations were made that we have accepted and delivered. As the Secretary of State set out in her recent speech, we need to do more, and that is a real priority.

Many people have highlighted concerns with the frontline staff and process. Since 2015, the Centre for Health and Disability Assessments has taken over the delivery of the work capability assessment, and the focus has been on improving the operational process. It has increased the number of healthcare professionals by 82% and 1,300 staff are now directly involved in supporting assessments. It has increased the number of assessment rooms and significantly improved the training programme—many speakers highlighted these issues, in particular in relation to individual conditions. There is broad training on disability analysis and on specific conditions, including multiple and complex conditions, which covers three distinct areas—principles and professional standards; the assessment process; and scrutiny and file work, with an emphasis on quality. Training is predominantly modular, with competency testing at every stage. The healthcare professional must then undergo the continuing medical education programme and is

subject to regular case reviews and audits. For complex cases, we expect the healthcare professional to refresh knowledge prior to the assessment.

One very important and welcome addition that has begun to be rolled out is the introduction of customer champions. I absolutely recognise just how anxious and nervous people can be when going for assessment. I absolutely get that. The customer champion can assist those claimants, before and after assessments, to ensure that they receive the best service. We have had good feedback on that, and the intention is that there will be one in every single assessment centre.

I also recognise the comments about communication—the brown envelopes coming through. There is a commitment from me to work further with stakeholders to improve the letters that come out. I have seen this as a constituency MP; I have taken a deep breath at the poor quality of some communications. We need to improve that.

Karen Lee: Does the Minister agree that subjecting people who have either a chronic illness, such as multiple sclerosis, or a terminal illness to these kinds of work capability assessments is totally unacceptable?

Justin Tomlinson: I cannot give a broad-brush answer. I know what the hon. Lady is saying and I am coming on to the use of evidence and how we can do more earlier and, potentially, then with paper-based assessments. I will come on to that. I understand, but I cannot give a definitive answer, because every claimant has their own unique challenges that have to be addressed.

In addition, SMS text message reminders about appointments have been welcomed, and there has been a lot of work on the website, which includes mock assessment videos so that people can get an idea of the sort of things to expect. Those things are all looking to remove some of the anxiety and worry about assessments. There is more to be done in that area, but we recognise that.

The improvements in the training and the extra healthcare professionals have meant that median clearance time halved from 25 weeks in March 2015 to 10 weeks in 2018, and customer satisfaction has exceeded the 92% target since that point. However, that does not mean that we are getting it right every time, and that is what I want to turn to now in focusing on MR and appeals.

All of us as Members are frustrated when what seem to be clear-cut cases come to our constituency surgeries asking for our help. There are times when we think, “How on earth can this have happened?”, and ultimately the person could have a very long appeal process to go through to get the right decision. In the majority of cases, appeals are successful because of additional oral and written evidence. That has to be addressed. We rightly are going to tackle it and will do so in two stages—first, with the MR process. We have started doing this with PIP. We are seeking to contact the claimant who is disputing a decision and talk to them directly to get the additional oral and, potentially, written evidence at that stage to see whether we can improve decisions at that point, rather than waiting for the evidence to come at the end of the appeal process.

Debbie Abrahams: Does the Minister think that it is unacceptable that any Government policy should cause their citizens to take their own life or to die? If he does, should there not be a moratorium on this policy until it is got right? Surely one death is one too many.

Justin Tomlinson: We all recognise that suicide is a tragic and complex issue, and we take it extremely seriously. We take the death of any claimant seriously and, where we are made aware that a person has died and it is suggested that that might be associated with the DWP directly, a review will be undertaken to identify whether any lessons can be learned and can be actioned.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: Let me make some progress, because this is a very important point about the MR process. We are in the early stages with a new way of looking at MRs, but there have been very positive results, and we will now roll this out to all the PIP dispute sites. We intend to do the same for the ESA sites as well.

The second stage has to do with the appeal process. Again, we recognise that people will submit additional, late written and oral evidence.

Patricia Gibson rose—

Justin Tomlinson: Let me just make this point. I want to explain one of the challenges. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), talked about a 30-week wait, in some cases, for an appeal. The person may have got the additional evidence in week six, but then the system is saying, “I’m sorry, but you’re going to have wait another 24 weeks until we can actually take that into account.” That is clearly not an ideal situation, so we are looking at how we can lapse appeals, where there is new evidence, to reconsider the decision with the additional evidence and be able then to give them a different decision. If we do not think that that should change the decision, they have the right to carry on right through to the final appeal process, but if it is something that is clearly going to change the decision, we should act as quickly as possible.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: In a second. Over the past five years, only 4% of work capability assessment ESA decisions have been revised at appeal, but we recognise that it is in no one’s interest that things should be picked up only after a lengthy appeal process, so we are absolutely committed to being proactive in this area, and this issue will be a real priority.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for giving way. I just wanted to ask for clarification on one point that he made, which was about appeals being successful because of new or additional information. How does he respond, then, to the fact that people who go on to appeal do so on the basis that the information that they see about themselves is badly or very badly expressed and incorrect, and to Citizens Advice saying that 81% of the customers it sees have inaccurate information recorded about them, which leads to a wrong decision?

Justin Tomlinson: I am coming on to how we can do more to ensure that the right evidence is put into the system at the earliest possible moment and in the right way. We do not want people who should be getting support to have to go through a lengthy process unnecessarily. We all agree on that, and I hope that hon. Members can see that what I am describing is an

[Justin Tomlinson]

important improvement. It is still at an early stage, but as I have seen in previous debates, it is the sort of thing that stakeholders want us to do, and we are rightly going to take it forward.

Let me come on to the point about evidence. It is referring to the integrated service. There is a bit of confusion in terms of what people thought that this would be. The view was that it ultimately would be a panacea whereby people would go for one single assessment for PIP and for the work capability assessment. The reality is that very few people apply for both benefits at a similar point in time. However, for the very few people who do, it might make sense for them to have, if they wish, both of the assessments on the same day instead of having to come in on the Monday and then again on the Wednesday. That may be what people want to do, but we are talking about very small numbers.

The thrust of this is to share evidence if the claimant wishes that to be done. One point that many hon. Members made was about the challenge that often arises of getting the evidence, whether from the GP, the physiotherapist or the hospitals, in a timely manner and in a way that is helpful for their assessment. If they have managed to do that once and they would like us to use that evidence again, with their consent, that is something that we would seek to do as part of building the new digital system and ensuring that the claimant has consistent, better information. Being able to share evidence will reduce the burden of providing the same evidence multiple times. It could potentially lead to fewer face-to-face assessments if we can gather crucial, vital, clear-cut evidence earlier in the claim.

I want to pay tribute to all the stakeholders, the medical experts, the charities and all the MPs across the House who regularly engage on this issue. Over the coming months, we will be doing a series of roundtables and regional events to gather further evidence, with a real emphasis on those with real experience of this area, so that we can further improve the system. We want to build trust, transparency and consistency and we want to improve the claimant's experience through a more

personalised and tailored approach. As a returning Minister, I am committed to supporting disabled people and those with long-term health conditions to claim and receive the benefits to which they are entitled and to ensuring that people are treated fairly and with dignity. I thank all the Members across the House who have contributed today.

3.58 pm

Laura Pidcock: I thank all the hon. Members who came to the Chamber today to share the painful experiences of their constituents. I pay tribute to my excellent caseworkers, who work day in and day out to try to get justice for people who are subject to the abuses of the state. I express solidarity also with all the disability rights campaign groups and advice services.

It is a real shame that not one Conservative Member came to the debate or prepared a speech and showed their constituents that they cared. They will have people who are subject to the work capability assessment, and I think that their absence is symbolic of their complicity in the system. This Minister is now in control of the system, so warm words and sympathy are not enough. The Minister has control, so action is necessary.

I want to stress this point in the 30 seconds that I have left. It is just not true that additional evidence is what wins at appeal. It is often evidence that the DWP could have had, and the evidence that people go and give in the initial assessment is the same as that at the appeal stage, so this is not about blaming advice and support agencies or the person for not giving the evidence in the first place. The evidence is there; it is the system that is flawed. The language is also an issue. They are not claimants or customers; they are people who are entitled to this support by the state.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered 10 years of the work capability assessment in relation to employment and support allowance and universal credit.

4 pm

Sitting suspended.

NHS: North-West London

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the NHS in north west London.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and to see so many of my Labour colleagues from north-west London here to support this debate. It will be a relatively short debate on a rather lengthy subject, so I will try to keep my remarks concise, or at least as well ordered and structured as I can. To that end, I will touch on two subjects, and perhaps mention one or two other issues. The first subject is the collapse or withdrawal of the “Shaping a healthier future” programme, which was principally around the reorganisation of acute care; the second is the commercial Babylon GP at Hand service, which is distorting the primary care market, and not just in Hammersmith and Fulham, or indeed in north-west London.

I will begin by reflecting on how we got to where we are. In 2012, “Shaping a healthier future” was heralded as the biggest hospital reorganisation programme in the history of the NHS, but was quickly called the biggest closure programme in its history. It was a scheme for closing four of the nine type 1 A&Es across north-west London, and completely restructuring, demolishing and—in common parlance—closing two of its major hospitals, Ealing and Charing Cross, which is in my constituency. When the scheme was announced, it was unambiguous that it was about saving money. It was part of a programme to save about £1 billion, and we were told that if it did not happen, the NHS in that area would go bankrupt. Those were literally the words that were used. Much water has flowed under the bridge over the past seven years, until almost exactly a month ago, when the scheme was withdrawn wholesale in a rather hole-in-the-corner way.

This is something of a bittersweet debate. I do not know anybody in north-west London who is not delighted that the scheme for hospital closures has been withdrawn, yet because of the way those seven years have been wasted and how the scheme has been dealt with over that time, we are left with as many questions as have been answered. I do not have time to go through the whole history of those seven years. Suffice it to say that Charing Cross Hospital is the second-largest hospital of the nine in its sub-region; it has 360 beds, almost all acute. It was to be demolished. It was to lose more than 300 of those beds—more than 90%. It was to lose all of its major emergency services and its A&E, and effectively be replaced by what was called a local hospital, with primary care and treatment facilities. In other words, it would have been a very radical shake-up.

Throughout the process, there was a frustrating lack of honesty; there was no admission of what the scheme was, certainly not at a political level. If someone drilled down into the business plan or clinical strategy, it was clear what was being advocated. We were told that in some way, the increase in community services and primary care that was also part of the “Shaping a healthier future” scheme would make up for the loss of those

hundreds of acute beds and those A&E facilities. It is now commonly accepted that this was always an entirely misconceived plan, as the King’s Fund—to give just one example—has said. Given the rise in demand, the best that could be hoped for was that if the increases in primary and other care services took place, we would be able to cope with the current amount of acute capacity.

The idea that we could dramatically reduce capacity was entirely misconceived. That is not conjecture; it was proven in 2014, when stage 1 of “Shaping a healthier future” went ahead, with the closure of the A&Es at Hammersmith Hospital and Central Middlesex Hospital. We were told that as those were not two of the main A&E departments, those closures would easily be coped with. However, demand at St Mary’s, Northwick Park and Charing Cross went up to such an extent that they had some of the worst waiting time figures of anywhere in the country. Since then, those figures have come down only slowly and gradually.

I hope that the Government and the health service will learn lessons from this scheme—that is probably the best gloss I can put on this. It has taken a huge amount of time and effort, and a huge amount of money wasted by the health service, to get to where we are today, which is effectively back to where we were seven years ago. In 2012, it looked as though the situation was hopeless, and I have to praise Ealing Council, which was then Labour-controlled. At that stage, Hammersmith and Fulham Council was under Conservative control, and from 2013 onwards it fully backed the closure strategy. Ealing Council stood absolutely solid and firm; it mounted a judicial review, and opposed those proposals from day one.

When there was a change of political control in 2014, that council was joined by Hammersmith and Fulham Council, which, together with surrounding Labour councils, set up the Mansfield commission under Michael Mansfield. That independent commission looked at the “Shaping a healthier future” proposals, and when it reported, it said that those proposals would be a health disaster for the area. By that stage, the sustainability and transformation plans had been introduced. In a way, it is regrettable—although it was the right thing to do—that both Hammersmith and Ealing councils refused to participate, because they knew how damaging “Shaping a healthier future” and the hospital closures would be for the area.

Over all that time, I do not think a week went by in which I did not deal with this issue, both here and in the constituency. There was a sustained campaign of what I can only call disinformation. A lot of money—£72 million is a conservative estimate—was spent on consultants, preparing for the “Shaping a healthier future” programme. All of that money was wasted. Despite the fact that we relied entirely on internal health service documents to prove what was being planned, I was constantly told by everyone from the then Prime Minister down that we were scaremongering, and that the proposals were sensible and helpful.

It is curious that when the Health Secretary announced the withdrawal of “Shaping a healthier future” a month ago, the Government withdrew support from the scheme, as if somebody else had thought it up. Until that point, we had been told every day and every week for seven years that it was a sensible scheme, which would only improve resources and services within the health service. It is to be regretted that the Government did not sit

[*Andy Slaughter*]

down with politicians, campaigners, local residents and the local health service to talk through where we were and where we were going. Instead, in a rather hole-in-the-corner way, they used the contrived trick of using a planted question from a Conservative Back Bencher to announce withdrawing from the scheme. That does not bode well for the future.

Although we are extremely pleased that the programme has been cancelled, and that both Ealing Hospital and Charing Cross Hospital will stay open, where do we go now? First, Charing Cross Hospital has the largest maintenance backlog—£300 million—of any hospital in the country. That was clearly not under consideration, because it was intended that the structure would be demolished. In actual fact, the capital moneys are simply not there to have done that in any event.

The other hospitals in the area, including West Middlesex, Chelsea and Westminster and St Mary's, were promised that they would benefit from the closures, and that there would be substantial investment. My question to the Minister is: what is the plan going forward? For political expediency, the Government have bailed out of "Shaping a healthier future", and we are grateful for that, but where do we go now? Certainly the clinicians and the managers in west London cannot answer those questions. This thing has been entirely derived and supported by the Conservative party and this Government. It is for them to answer that question, rather than simply leaving our local health service to stew in that way.

Before I move on, I want to say that some of the staunchest campaigners have turned up to listen to this debate. I last saw them at the victory party at Hammersmith town hall a couple of weeks ago. Without their contribution, we would not be here. They countered well funded, well resourced and entirely disingenuous statements about what would happen to the health service. Every week, rain or shine, they were out talking to and converting the local population. One could say that the local population might not need much conversion to preserve a much-loved, major local hospital that has just celebrated its 200th anniversary, but the reality is that that needed to be done, because millions were being spent on spinning the yarn that the changes would be good for local health services. The campaign was not based simply on sentiment or popular feeling. It was well researched, and well supported with independent clinical evidence. The campaign was based on the day-to-day, week-to-week, absolute dedication of people who worked for nothing, and had nothing in common other than their love of the national health service and their feeling that Government at all levels had got it wrong.

With that, I will move to another topic, GP at Hand, which the Minister probably does know something about. We have become increasingly alarmed at its trajectory. For those who do not know, GP at Hand is a digital app provided by a private company called Babylon Health. The service has raised an enormous amount of concern at different levels; I will narrow that to four points.

The first and most obvious concern is how GP at Hand works. It attaches itself to a particular bricks-and-mortar GP practice—in this case, a particular surgery in Fulham. It was an orthodox GP surgery with a list of around 4,000 patients before that association began. As of today, it is approaching 50,000 patients, and is one of

the largest GP practices in the country. That distortion has a cost implication for the clinical commissioning group, initially in Hammersmith and Fulham. It is estimated that over the two years from 2018 to 2020, that distortion alone will cost the CCG about £26 million. There is no provision for that at the moment, and that has to be addressed. I would like to hear from the Minister that there is a scheme for addressing that, and that there will be full reimbursement of those costs.

For those who are not aware of how the system works, it is very straightforward. When patients sign up to a GP practice, the money effectively goes with them. What is not anticipated is that there will suddenly be a tenfold increase in a patient list over one or two years. Why is that money not simply redirected? It has been, to some extent, to the CCGs in west and north-west London, but the money is not provided to the much wider catchment area—GP at Hand now serves not only Greater London and a wider travel area, but has expanded to Birmingham—because those other CCGs are saying, "Hang on." A digital app of this kind attracts a certain type of patient: younger, fitter patients—effectively those without complex medical conditions or co-morbidities. They do not take up a lot of the GP's time, as their issues are relatively simple and straightforward to deal with. Often they do not contact the GP at all for long periods.

Those patients effectively subsidise older and sicker patients. There is a perfectly understandable resistance from local GPs and CCGs to allowing those patients to escape, leaving them only with the most demanding and least cost-effective patients. If the issue is not addressed, the problem that results for my CCG is an annually increasing bill, going from £10 million to £16 million and who knows what beyond that, with no provision for that in any way.

The second concern, which has been expressed by clinicians and those who have simply tested out the app, is whether the app—like other apps, it is based on algorithms and diagnostic tools—is accurate and good enough. Has it been sufficiently tested? It is growing logarithmically across the country. It is not a question of it perhaps being tested in a small area and got absolutely right before it moves on. It could be in your constituency tomorrow, Sir Christopher, and it could be across the entire country in a year or two.

The third issue is that GP at Hand is driven entirely by a single commercial provider. It is a way of doing digitisation, but it is the way of the wild west to simply allow one particular firm to start from one location and expand across the country at a rate that it determines, controlled only by its advertising budget and its ability to attract customers. In my submission, there is no thought behind how that is done. The NHS is jumping to the tune that is being played by GP at Hand. One might suggest that it should be the other way around.

The fourth and perhaps most contentious issue is the fact that this particular private provider has had the support of the Secretary of State for Health from the beginning. He is a subscriber and has written about it in glowing terms. Whenever the matter is raised in the House and he is responding, at Health questions or wherever else, he has only praise to give it, but he is partial to this. Not only is that of concern in itself, but it means that when one is talking to local, regional and even national organisations within the NHS—this is

now a national issue—they are looking over their shoulder, because their boss or their boss's boss is saying, "This is the future and this is what is going to happen."

With the support of a number of colleagues, I have written today to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, asking the Committee to undertake an investigation into GP at Hand. I know that she shares a lot of my concerns, so I am hopeful that that investigation will follow. I ask the Minister to give what assurances she can on those four points that I have raised.

Sir Christopher, I can see you are looking at the clock, and my colleagues are looking at me with daggers drawn, so I will speak for one more minute and then sit down. That means that I cannot go into detail about the other local health service issues, which will have to wait for another day. Suffice it to say—I will give a lightning portrait—that in Hammersmith and Fulham, we have a number of failing GP practices that are either suspended or require improvement. We have planned substantial cuts to our CCGs of £30 million. We have cuts planned to palliative care, community care and the hospital sector, including a proposal to close the hydrotherapy pool at Charing Cross Hospital. Everybody who has been involved in that has told me that it provides an invaluable service.

The overall picture is one of declining and reducing services. Only yesterday, a letter informed us that the "Beyond places of safety" scheme, which is very good, has been suspended because the funding is not there. There is no pretence any more that we are restructuring services, or reducing such things as management costs—that has all been done. What is being cut now are basic and essential services from the community, primary and indeed acute sectors.

I will conclude, as colleagues want to contribute to the debate. I hope that the Minister appreciates the seriousness, complexity and universality of the cuts that are happening across the health service. I hope that she will be more magnanimous than some of her colleagues in admitting the mistake that was made over "Shaping a healthier future". We can turn the page and move on. We all want to work together for improved health, but first, some of these issues have to be addressed.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. The wind-ups will start at quarter past 5, and five Members wish to catch my eye. I believe in self-regulation; you can do the maths for yourselves. I call Mr Virendra Sharma.

4.51 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and congratulate him on securing this important debate.

North-west London has been a guinea pig—unloved and uncared for in the testing of a failed experiment. It has taken our local NHS trust and the Secretary of State all this time to recognise what we have been saying for years. When I say "us", I mean not just Members of this House, but doctors, nurses, clinicians and, most

importantly, patients and the local community. The "Shaping a healthier future" programme was not fit for purpose. It did not work, and it did not deliver for those who needed it most.

Two weeks ago, I attended a party in Ealing—my hon. Friend mentioned that he had one in Hammersmith—celebrating the end of "Shaping a healthier future". My constituents were ecstatic. I have rarely seen more strongly held convictions than those they had that lives were being put at risk by the scheme. The cancellation of the programme is the greatest gift that we could have been given. It was almost an Easter miracle. Ealing Hospital, Charing Cross Hospital and others in the area can now rise from the dead and continue to serve our constituents.

However, those hospitals remain broken—not yet whole again. Ealing Hospital has lost full A&E services, which we badly need. We have lost our maternity ward and in-patient paediatric care. I remember, only a few years ago, spending time with volunteers in that area helping to raise funds for a publicly paid-for refurbishment of that children's ward. It now lies empty. The garden we built is un-played in, and the swings are still. Its closure was a slap in the face to hospital users and the patients' group. Parents felt un-consulted—a theme that runs throughout the "Shaping a healthier future" programme. It always seemed to be a top-down programme: a project put on local people and led by Whitehall that was not what patients needed.

Thankfully, the scheme is now only a failed experiment, not an ongoing disaster, but the clearing and cleaning up still need time and effort. Local residents want to feel listened to. They want to feel that their needs are being placed at the centre of their care, not treated as a peripheral concern. I hope that the Minister can commit to restoring services to all our hospitals in north-west London, but—I would say, selfishly—particularly to Ealing Hospital, which is in my constituency.

The London Borough of Ealing has a very high number of young people, but suffers from one of the highest levels of lifestyle-led premature death. The widely reported Mansfield commission into the programme roundly condemned the "Shaping a healthier future" plans, and found that cuts were falling disproportionately on the poorest in society. Minister, please reverse the cuts and give my worst-off constituents a fair chance at healthy and full lives, unblighted by ill health.

4.56 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on introducing this timely debate. Before I say any more, I need to declare an interest: my husband is a non-executive director of the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital Trust.

I congratulate the key people who have made this possible: the campaigners. They have worked tirelessly and, as my hon. Friend said, for no money for, I think, seven years now, to wake the community up about the implications of the loss of, initially, four hospitals. We have since lived through the closure of many services, the downgrading of Charing Cross Hospital and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) said, the downgrading and withdrawal of services at Ealing Hospital.

[Ruth Cadbury]

The issue is important to my constituents in a number of ways. First, for the residents of Chiswick, in the east side of my constituency, Charing Cross is their nearest hospital. It is the hospital that they look to for all the basic services, particularly A&E. It is the nearest and easiest to get to. They have rightly been really angry and worried about the loss of that hospital, as have residents in Hammersmith and other parts of west London—the places for which Charing Cross is the nearest and easiest hospital to get to. We have had many campaigners and many campaign days, signing petitions at public meetings and so on, in Chiswick over the last seven years.

The impact of the cuts to services, and the threat of cuts to services, in Charing Cross and Ealing in particular, have affected all residents across my constituency; for many of my constituents, Ealing is their nearest hospital. The other concern surrounds the impact on the general hospital in my constituency, the West Middlesex University Hospital, part of the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital Trust. It has been very difficult for staff there to plan properly, and for patients to know what their future will be in terms of potential services.

The recent announcement on the ending of “Shaping a healthier future” was not entirely a surprise. We have heard nothing for months, if not years—no new information, and no new developments. However, A&E attendance has increased—by 11%, I think, at Charing Cross in recent years. The increasing pressure on Ealing and Charing Cross hospitals is not entirely surprising. Hon. Members for constituencies not only in London but throughout the country have said in debate after debate on the NHS that we are seeing more and more pressure on accident and emergency services as a result of our rising population, the withdrawal of basic primary care, and the cutbacks in adult social care and mental health services, as well as a whole host of other issues.

There is no way that the loss of significant accident and emergency services in west London could fail to cause incredible pressure on the remaining services and long journey times, given the levels of congestion in London. Another problem, as I know from many constituents who work at Charing Cross and Ealing hospitals, is the effect on staff morale: will people apply for a job in those hospitals, where they do not know how long their post will be available, or will they try for a vacancy in another hospital? The impact on morale, team building and team continuity is bound to have an effect—admittedly one difficult to measure—on patient care.

What we want to know from the Minister, given the ending of the “Shaping a healthier future” programme, is how the NHS estate, particularly the acute estate in north-west London, will be planned and financed in future. It feels as if we are in a strategic vacuum. When will we know whether there will be sufficient acute beds? The original plan was that the “Shaping a healthier future” programme would free up a load of capital to be spent in other hospitals around west London, including St Mary’s in Paddington, West Mid and so on, but where are the acute beds that are so desperately needed as A&E attendances rise? How will they be funded? What does all this mean for the future of integrated care organisations?

I share the concern of colleagues across west London about the shambles of the “Shaping a healthier future” programme’s initiation, continuation and end. I also share their concern about what will happen next.

5.2 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Six months ago, at the beginning of November, the walk-in centre at Alexandra Avenue in my constituency closed its doors for the last time. If there was ever a much-loved and vital service that told the story of the NHS funding crisis in north-west London, it was Alexandra Avenue. Its opening 10 years ago was strongly opposed by the Harrow West Conservative party and its then parliamentary candidate. She and the Harrow West Conservatives were not immediately successful in getting it closed, but in 2013 it was closed during weekdays; it was kept open at weekends, although only as a result of local campaigning. In November, the Conservatives finally got their way: a service that, at its height, provided a valuable walk-in service from 8 am to 8 pm, 365 days a year, to 40,000 people in my constituency and the surrounding constituencies, finally shut its doors.

Bluntly, the centre’s closure was a result of the clinical commissioning group’s lack of funding. The CCG has been put into special measures because its forecast deficit is £40 million, according to a written answer that I received in February from the then Minister, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine). Not surprisingly, it is under pressure to make a huge range of cuts, so not only is there no prospect that the Alexandra Avenue walk-in centre will be reopened, but other walk-in centres that serve Harrow are vulnerable to the threat of closure at a moment’s notice.

Nor is it surprising that the situation has had an impact on Northwick Park Hospital, which serves my constituency. It has not met the A&E waiting target for some considerable time: over the past five years, 25% of patients in A&E have not been seen within four hours, which gives a further indication of the decline in quality across the national health service in north-west London.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for securing this debate and allowing me to ask the Minister a number of questions. When will the north-west London NHS be properly funded? When will there be an end to the sorry tale of the clinical commissioning group always finding itself in deficit? It is not that it cannot manage its books. It has had excellent chairs and an excellent board; I pay tribute to the outgoing chair, Dr Amol Kelshiker, and the new chair, Dr Genevieve Small, for their willingness and commitment, but they deserve to know that their CCG will be properly funded.

When will Northwick Park Hospital no longer have to face inadequate funding, like the other hospitals in the trust? When will those hospitals get the support that they need to get the consultants and nurses in place to meet their A&E targets? My hon. Friend mentioned the closure of Central Middlesex Hospital’s A&E service, which has had a huge impact on services in north-west London, including the services at Northwick Park Hospital that my constituents depend on. Frankly, it should be reopened, because we need that acute capacity. It would be good to hear whether the Minister could ever foresee such a scenario.

It is now clear that cancer waiting times are also under pressure in our community. For the first time, the maximum two-week wait for a first consultant appointment after an urgent GP referral is not being met, according to the latest data on our area.

Harrow clinical commissioning group needs to be properly funded, funding for the NHS in north-west London needs to be significantly increased, and—in my view—England’s national health service needs a dedicated national fund for walk-in services in communities, such as my own, in which there is strong evidence of demand. I look forward to some positive reassurance from the Minister that the Conservative party has changed its attitude to walk-in services such as those at Alexandra Avenue in Rayners Lane.

5.7 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship for the second time today, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing this short but important debate. He was quite right to use the word “bittersweet” in the context of the collapse of the “Shaping a healthier future” strategy. It was sweet, in that it lifted a shadow from Charing Cross Hospital. There has been a continuing surge in A&E admissions over many years, during which we have consistently been told that a strategic approach to health services should be about reducing such admissions and replacing them with services in the community. That is a principle that I think everyone would agree with, and the lifting of the shadow is a good thing, but as we have heard from other hon. Members, it is clear that the strategic shaping of healthcare in north-west London remains very much in doubt.

I will focus on St Mary’s Hospital in Paddington, which is just outside my constituency but is the main hospital for it. It is the major acute provider for north-west London, and one of the four major trauma centres in London, with a 24/7 A&E department. It is a hospital very dear to my heart—it saved my life once, and I gave birth there—and it is held in very high regard among my constituents. Quite rightly, it has a terrific reputation for clinical care; we should never miss an opportunity to record our admiration for the staff, who deliver healthcare so superbly to the public.

None of that should blind us to a very grim reality, which is that St. Mary’s Hospital is very old. In some instances, it is quite literally falling down. It is now 14 years since the Paddington health campus proposal finally collapsed, which was the first vision of the redevelopment of St. Mary’s Hospital. Here we are in 2019, with the collapse of “Shaping a healthier future”, and we are still frozen in terms of a major redevelopment for St Mary’s.

In January 2018, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust gained full planning permission for the first phase of the redevelopment of St. Mary’s, which is a new eight-story out-patient and ambulatory service building on the site. The trust submitted the outline business case for the investment required to NHS Improvement, NHS England and the local commissioning groups. Under those plans, the trust is looking to house most of the St Mary’s out-patient and ambulatory services in the new building, but this has been on hold since January 2018. It is not an academic issue; the failure to

gain funding and approval from key stakeholders for the redevelopment programme is a key risk on the trust’s corporate risk register, because the conditions of St Mary’s Hospital have deteriorated so much. Planning permission has only two years left.

While we are waiting for the funding to be put together for the redevelopment of the hospital within that timescale, the structural issues in the hospital have become absolutely and imminently challenging. The structural problems in the Cambridge wing at St Mary’s resulted in two wards being out of use, with no possible value-for-money structural solution. There is a £1.3 billion backlog maintenance liability across the five hospitals, including St Mary’s. As we have heard, the backlog is the biggest in the country, and St Mary’s has the largest in the trust. In fact, 30% of all high-risk backlog maintenance in the NHS in England is at Imperial College Healthcare.

I just mentioned one of the wards that has been out of action, and St Mary’s maternity services had to be temporarily relocated due to a lift fault in September 2018. The Grafton ward closed due to significant structural concerns, with the loss of 32 beds in May 2018 and no possible structural solution. A ceiling collapsed in the Thistlethwaite ward. The Paterson Centre was flooded and closed for two weeks, with the loss of activity and 20 surgical beds in 2017. Floods, electrical issues and drainage problems are commonplace across the buildings and services at St Mary’s. The hospital simply cannot wait, yet everything is now frozen.

We urgently need advice from the Minister on how we will proceed. Should there be a further structural problem of the kind that we have already seen, it would not only be an imminent risk to patients, but would take out chunks of capacity from an already highly stretched hospital, which will have repercussions across the whole of north-west London. We simply cannot go on like this. I hope the Minister will give us an indication of how the St Mary’s maintenance backlog, structural programme and redevelopment will proceed.

5.12 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Good news for a change from this Government, who have admitted that the crackpot “Shaping a healthier future” plan to cut the nine major hospitals in north-west London to five is not workable and has been killed off. It was always a David and Goliath battle.

I pay tribute to, on the one side, Ealing Save our NHS, which works shoulder to shoulder with Save our Hospitals Charing Cross and our two Labour councils, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) mentioned. They are people like Ollie, Eve, Arthur and Judy Breens, Aysha, Raj and Gill, who held protests and popped up at every carnival. They organised parties, lobbies and petitions, and distributed a quarter of a million leaflets, all of which were paid for out of rattling buckets and their own pockets.

On the other side, we had “Shaping a healthier future”, with its swanky offices in upmarket Marylebone. Tens of millions of pounds of NHS cash from the public purse was spent on private management consultants, who all mysteriously alleged that if they junked departments, A&Es and hundreds of beds, health outcomes would somehow improve. In the end, the figures did not work. Quelle surprise! They never worked.

[Dr Rupa Huq]

As early as 2012, John Lister pointed out in his report that the whole thing was a pile of nonsense, as did reports from the two councils, which involved the forensic skills of Sir Michael Mansfield, QC. Even then, seven years into a five-year-long failing plan, local health bosses were still carrying on as if the emperor were fully clothed. There was a heavy-handed threat of legal action against me, because my 2017 general election leaflets pointed out that it did not work. That arrived days after my mother passed away at Ealing Hospital—I know every bit of the hospital, right down to the morgue.

Where next? These disastrous Frankenstein plans have seen the two A&Es nearest to Acton Central—Middlesex and Hammersmith—completely shut their doors. I congratulate the Minister on her appointment, and my question to her is: can we have them back, as well as the stroke unit, paediatrics, maternity services and A&E admissions for children at Ealing? All these things mean that the figures for type 1 A&E urgent visits are going through the roof. No more babies are to be born at Ealing. As a mum, I recently had to schlep out of the borough for a paediatric appointment at the West Middlesex Hospital, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith said, we need a serious exercise in lessons learned from this whole sorry episode, rather than clinging on to defend the indefensible and denying that there are serious problems. Ealing Hospital remains perilously underfunded and in crisis. Staff morale has been sapped, as was pointed out, by all the uncertainty. We could go on and on about the Brexit effects—the EU nurses exiting in droves and the social care sector being hollowed out by this Government, who are obsessed with their £30,000 skills target.

The slaying of the beast that was “Shaping a healthier future,” which was always known locally as “Shafting a healthier future,” is not before time and has raised eyebrows, such is the cynicism of politics in our time. As we did at the Drayton Court Hotel in my constituency last week, let us eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow there might be another election.

5.16 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for securing this debate. I know that he is a passionate advocate for the NHS in his area. Although I am pleased to respond on behalf of Labour, it is with sadness that hon. Members have to come here over and over to explain the impact on their constituents of the crisis in the NHS.

We have heard a mixed message of plans made and abandoned. It is a story of a shambles, and declining and reducing services, including the loss of services for children, maternity and stroke care. It is no secret that the NHS is under extreme pressure. After nearly a decade of stagnant investment, coupled with a recruitment crisis and a retention time-bomb, the cracks are really starting to show, as we have just heard. The King's Fund notes that during the Labour Government, budget

growth in the NHS was an average of 3.7% a year. It has dropped to an average of 1% a year during the Conservatives' time in office. The recent announcements of additional funding are of course welcome. However, the British Medical Association and the King's Fund acknowledge that the promised £20.5 billion, which equates to an increase of 3.4%, is simply not enough after nine years of severe underfunding. It is not even enough to wipe out hospital deficits.

Where is the funding to guarantee sustainable health services in the face of ever-increasing demand from a complex and changing demographic? Where is the funding to renew NHS infrastructure or outdated hospital equipment? Just repairing the dilapidated hospital buildings will cost in excess of £3 billion. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) about the state of the buildings at St Mary's Hospital and the urgent work that is needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) outlined the refurbishment work that is urgently needed.

Of course, it is not all about money. I was brought up to believe that you get what you pay for. It is clear that if we do not invest much, we will not get much. Is it any wonder that we have a staffing crisis in the NHS? The Conservative Government's failure to provide adequate resource and support has created problems in both staff recruitment and retention. The Government continue to exploit the good will of dedicated NHS staff, many of whom are pushed to breaking point. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) pointed out, staff morale is at an all-time low.

It is inconceivable that more and more hospitals should constantly face the threat of closure. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and the committed grassroots campaigners for their extensive work over many years to save these vital hospitals. These victories are really welcome, but the Hammersmith and Fulham CCG faces cuts of £30 million. Is it not disgraceful to hear, in the light of that, that £72 million was wasted on private consultants? It is astonishingly incompetent, above all else.

Of course, the cuts to the CCG forced it to reduce urgent care, local GP hours and access to primary care, which is short-sighted as it causes suffering for constituents and often leads to more expensive or hospital treatments. It seems that the Health Secretary's only answer is to focus on technology. I agree that technology has a role to play in the future delivery of NHS services, but we must proceed with caution. Patients' needs are paramount, and we must ensure that their safety is never compromised.

I share my hon. Friend's concern about the use of online GPs. It is clear that the app providing access to such services, GP at Hand, will be very convenient for some people, and is likely to appeal to younger patients. Indeed, Ipsos MORI found that 87% of all GP at Hand patients are aged between 20 and 39. It is also likely that online GPs will prove attractive to patients with less complex medical needs, leaving the providers open to the accusation of cherry-picking. They are undoubtedly delivering a service for which there is demand, but the fact remains that many patients need to attend a traditional GP consultation.

Of course, many patients do not know when they register with an online GP that they are deregistered from their GP surgery. That has serious consequences for the financial viability of the traditional surgery.

Hammersmith and Fulham CCG has paid £10 million to GP at Hand. That money is no longer paid to local surgeries, which are as busy as ever catering for patients with multiple complex needs, and their overheads are still as great as they ever were. It is imperative that the funding model for the delivery of GP services is adjusted to reflect the fact—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I have interrupted the hon. Lady, because we must hear from the Minister and time is very limited.

Julie Cooper: I will sum up, Sir Christopher.

Patients are suffering. We want assurances from the Minister about future hospital closures, sustainable funding and the role of technology in the modern NHS. We want to know the direction of travel of the NHS in north-west London and the country as a whole.

5.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for securing this important debate, and all hon. Members for speaking so passionately. I welcome the campaigners, who have been following our deliberations this afternoon. Everybody has spoken passionately about NHS services in north-west London, and the hon. Gentleman spoke about his area of Hammersmith and Fulham. I am under considerable time pressure, and if I do not answer all the questions that hon. Members raised, which ranged over primary and acute care, I am happy to write to them later.

I would like to start by thanking everybody who works in the NHS—in primary, secondary and community care—for everything they do, particularly in north-west London, which is a busy area with a lot of demand on services. It is exposed to unique pressures, but there are also unique opportunities. It has some of the country's busiest services and is used by an increasing, complex and dynamic population. Our capital city challenges our NHS, but it is also home to transformation and innovation that has delivered important benefits for patients.

“Shaping a healthier future” looked at the pressures on the NHS in and around the hon. Gentleman's constituency. It achieved significant benefits for patients in north-west London. It delivered 24/7 urgent care centres in every local borough and improvements in maternity and emergency paediatric care, and introduced a range of initiatives to help people obtain the specialist care they need closer to home. The NHS in north-west London is now in agreement to move on from the “Shaping a healthier future” programme. The hon. Gentleman asked specifically what the future will hold. In January, the Government announced that there will be an extra £20 billion a year for the NHS by 2024. As part of that, every area in the country will need to develop its own local plan for the next five years for how to spend the extra money. The north-west London sustainability and transformation partnership, working with clinicians and the public, will develop a new long-term, five-year plan for how best to spend that money, working together as a single health system.

I want quickly to address the points that the hon. Gentleman made about the lack of honesty in the north-west London process. Reconfiguration processes are, by their very nature, contentious, and raise many passions locally and nationally. His passion was evident from his contribution. The consultation process in north-west London involved extensive public consultation and clinical engagement throughout. It is important to recognise the high level of clinical engagement. It was never a political exercise or a *fait accompli*. Its underpinning principle was what was best for patients with the available resources. We need to support NHS staff and managers as they face the challenges before us. We must help them to manage service change responsibly. General practice primary care is the front door to and the cornerstone of the NHS, which is why the long-term plan addressed it when it was published in January.

I want to speak about Babylon GP at Hand. The hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues, and I will do my best to answer them. He spoke about the cost to the CCG. I wrote to one of his council colleagues this morning about the issues he raised. I understand that the CCG has reported that it overspent by £10 million in 2018-19, specifically in relation to GP at Hand. NHS England will of course have to look at the year's final accounts and any overspend in more detail to understand better the precise financial impact of changes in the borough. For 2019-20, the CCG's target allocation has increased, all else being equal, in line with the growth in its overall registered population up to the 12-month average for November 2017 to October 2018. NHS England does not believe that the CCG has had to scale back services because of any extra financial burden from GP at Hand, but we will continue to work with the CCG and other partners to explore options for maintaining the robustness of the commissioning system, both now, while GP at Hand is focused in London, and in the future.

I just want to address the hon. Gentleman's point about safety.

Andy Slaughter: I suspect the Minister was referring to my colleague, Councillor Ben Coleman, the cabinet member for health and adult social care, who wrote to the Secretary of State on 15 April specifically asking for the money spent—£10 million—to be refunded, and for a commitment to reimburse the CCG fully for the cost of GP at Hand. I did not hear the Minister say that, so will she give that assurance?

Seema Kennedy: I cannot give that reassurance, and I would only reiterate what I have just said to the hon. Gentleman.

On the safety of the app, all NHS providers are held to account through a robust network of systems, including, and not limited to, the inspections of the Care Quality Commission. Any apps providing video consultations must be evaluated and regulated to ensure that the patients who access those services can be confident that they receive safe, effective and high-quality care. Hammersmith and Fulham CCG, along with NHS England, has commissioned an independent evaluation of GP at Hand, which will report shortly.

I question what the shadow Minister said. Digital technology is part of the solution, but the Department is looking at other ways of transforming primary care.

[Seema Kennedy]

We are looking at how we look at partnership models and at how we pivot to primary in future. All patients will have a right to digital-first primary care, including web and video consultations, from April '21. All patients will be able to have digital access to their full records from 2020. They can, from this month, order repeat prescriptions electronically as the default.

By the end of the next decade, digital innovations are likely to have transformed the NHS. They will allow clinicians to work more efficiently and flexibly so they have more time to spend caring for patients. Every pound spent will go further. That will allow for greater responsiveness and personalisation for patients. We need to design services for patients and things that are available for people when they want them and at times that are convenient for them. I am pleased that the Government have committed to saying that all patients will have access to digital-first primary care from April 2021.

I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the effect of GP at Hand on primary care as a whole in his constituency. The challenge for the Government and NHS England is to ensure that the way we commission, contract and pay for care keeps up with the opportunities digital innovation offers, ensuring that the new technology is safely integrated into existing pathways without unduly destabilising the services it works alongside. Two important principles within the NHS are that a patient can choose which practice they register with, and that funding follows the patient. The emergence of digital-first providers, which register patients who may live some distance from the practice, raises the question of whether these funding arrangements are fair. This year, NHS England is analysing and reviewing the out-of-area registration.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Westminster Hall

Thursday 25 April 2019

[DAME CHERYL GILLAN *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Post Office Network

1.30 pm

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Before we start the debate, I remind colleagues that the Post Office group litigation concerning in particular sub-postmasters and their contractual relationships with the Post Office is currently before the courts. In accordance with the House's sub judice resolution, reference should not be made in the debate to cases that are currently before the courts. I will allow discussion of the wider issues relating to the sustainability of the post office network—that is permissible—but I remind Members that I will intervene if I think they are overstepping the mark.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the sustainability of the Post Office network.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship yet again, Dame Cheryl. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate on the sustainability of the post office network and the many Members from all parts of the House who supported my application for it. I also thank my Hansard Society scholar intern, Rebecca Orbach, who worked so effectively in organising my application.

At the outset, I want to recognise and thank the sub-postmasters in my constituency, and across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, who work hard in difficult circumstances to serve our communities. I also want to acknowledge a hard-working sub-postmaster—they know who they are—for working across all parties to seek support for the future of post offices. Friends in the National Federation of SubPostmasters and the Communication Workers Union also deserve our recognition for their fight for the preservation of the post office network. Finally, I thank all those who have attended today's debate. I am sure that Members will agree that the post office is a recognised and important part of our respective communities and an institution that is widely recognised and respected across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

The post office is a valued public asset, as many of our constituents have made us aware. From the reaction of people in my constituency to the Crown branch closure in the centre of Motherwell and the temporary closure of the branch in the centre of Wishaw, I know that people and businesses not only use, but rely on their post offices and the services they provide. Their importance has underpinned the strong opposition in communities to the franchising of Crown branches and the closure of franchised branches due to poor postmaster pay.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady most sincerely on securing this important debate. Part of the problem in my constituency is that over the past year we have had temporary closures in Ogmore Vale, Aberkenfig and the community of Bettws. Those temporary closures are ongoing, with one of them nearing a year. Post offices provide banking services as well as the postal service, and they are often linked to local shops. Those services are important, given all the bank closures in my constituency. I have only one bank left for 58,000 constituents. Temporary closures are as much of a problem in my constituency as permanent closures. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Post Office needs to up its game in resolving those temporary closures?

Marion Fellows: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I will come to the point he raises further into my speech.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am more cynical than my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore); I have had a temporary closure that has lasted four years and I have four temporary closures. The Post Office knows that permanent closures get a lot of opposition, so temporary closures and downgrading Crown post offices to the back of WHSmith is its way of undermining the network while muting public opposition. I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She is obviously not fooled in that way.

Marion Fellows: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have a temporary postmaster still in office in Wishaw after the sub-post office there was temporarily closed last year.

What the public are seeing is yet another managed decline of a valued public asset driven by a Tory ideology of non-intervention. The public are, through their elected Government, the owners of Post Office Ltd. They feel and have let their elected Members know that the Government should be driving action to ensure the sustainability and promotion of the post office network. I hope the Minister will outline not only the actions her Department has taken, but the further actions she will take in response to the concerns of communities, postmasters and Members here today.

The main issue undermining the sustainability of the post office network is the postmaster crisis. At the root of that is sub-postmaster pay. Scottish National party MPs and Members from all parties have heard over and over again from their local sub-postmasters about how poor pay is a leading cause of closures in their constituencies; I have even had sub-postmasters contact me from England to complain about the level of pay they are receiving.

The National Federation of SubPostmasters—the organisation that represents sub-postmasters across the UK—has said that two thirds of branch closures are due to sub-postmaster resignations, and they have attributed that to low pay. Sub-postmasters' general conditions are also poor, with as many as one third taking no time off at all last year.

A survey released this month by the National Federation of SubPostmasters found that one in five towns could lose its post office in the next year. Of the 1,000 workers surveyed, 22% plan to hand in their keys, pass on their branch or downsize. The Post Office's 2017-18 annual report states

[*Marion Fellows*]

that sub-postmasters' pay has fallen by £17 million in one year. That is a 4.4% cut. Sub-postmasters sustained a brutal £27 million cut the year before. Looking at postmasters' pay in the long term, we see that it has declined by £107 million since 2012.

As part of Post Office Ltd's North Star initiative to create a profit of £100 million by 2021, it used cuts to sub-postmasters' pay to increase its profits from £13 million to £35 million in 2017-18. That is while the majority of sub-postmasters earn less than the minimum wage for running a vital public service in their communities.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The issue has been raised by sub-postmasters across the UK, and I have had meetings with some in my constituency. My hon. Friend has talked about the job that sub-postmasters do. The sub-postmaster in Scotstoun, Ali Akram, has an old folks' sheltered housing complex across the road. He considers the work he does there to be a vital community service. He goes way above and beyond his actual job—he helps the men and ladies package things up and properly address them and so on—but when we consider the pay of sub-postmasters, that is not valued at all.

Marion Fellows: My hon. Friend is completely right, and I have heard many similar tales from Members from all parts of the Chamber. One told me that the sub-postmaster who served his mother actually helped her with her banking, going way over and above what he was paid to do. At meetings with sub-postmasters, I have been told how they feel driven to help their communities, but because of the limited pay they are getting, they feel they will no longer be able to offer that valuable public service.

The majority of sub-postmasters earn less than the minimum wage for running a vital public service. Our postmasters are being overworked and underpaid while Post Office Ltd is allowed to Hoover up their wages for its own profit, rather than properly remunerating the people responsible for that profit. What is the Minister's assessment of the Post Office's North Star initiative in general and in relation to the decrease in sub-postmaster pay? Postmasters are working hard for poor pay so the executive board can meet its arbitrary profit targets. There is no real pay-off to that, as it is fuelling the downfall of the post office network.

There is also no real strategy to deal with the crisis that the Post Office faces. Across the UK, 460 postmasters want to leave as part of the network transformation programme, but cannot do so until a new postmaster is found. Currently, there is interest, and interest only, in 90 of those branches, so 460 people are essentially being held captive because the remuneration rates are so poor that Post Office Ltd cannot find a new postmaster to fill the position.

I am aware that a deal has recently been struck that will increase remuneration on banking transactions, but that is only one small source of income for sub-postmasters, and it will not come into effect for another six months. What discussions has the Minister had with Post Office Ltd on remuneration for postmasters, and why is there a six-month wait before the new rates come into force?

Our postmasters need better pay now, and the whole postmaster contract, introduced in 2012 under a Tory Government, needs to be reviewed. Will the Minister commit to urgent action to review the whole contract?

In February, the Minister wrote to me to say that she would ask Post Office Ltd for the hourly rates effectively paid to sub-postmasters. Her Department must conduct an independent analysis of that. Given the poor treatment of postmasters by Post Office Ltd over decades, it is essential that the injustices that they have faced and the oppositional stance from Post Office Ltd management are not allowed to continue and influence any findings or outcomes. The attitude of Post Office Ltd towards postmasters has been shameful, and caused the loss of dozens of jobs and ongoing legal action that is now sub judice. I hope that the Minister will commit to an independent analysis of remuneration to sub-postmasters, and to a thorough review of postmasters' contracts.

Furthermore, our postmasters have already been paying the price for the executive targets of Post Office Ltd through poor pay. Any future unexpected legal costs payable by Post Office Ltd must not influence decisions on postmaster pay. Postmasters cannot be expected to continue to pay the price for the Post Office's shortcomings. The Government must, for once, put the interests of working people ahead of the aims and aspirations of an executive board and profit. I hope that the Minister will commit to ensuring that the outcome of any court case will not affect any potential new deal for sub-postmasters.

The consequence of poor postmaster pay is that communities are left without a branch and the services that they need. In response to a written question last month, Post Office Ltd confirmed that 1,016 branches across the UK are temporarily closed right now. Of all 12 regions of the UK, Scotland is the hardest hit by the postmaster crisis, with the highest number of temporarily closed branches—currently 134, representing 13% of all temporarily closed branches. That is 134 communities without something as simple as a post office, and 52 of the 315 branches with a temporary operator are also located in Scotland.

Temporary closures are affecting access. In 2017, Citizens Advice reviewed the Government's access criteria and raised two concerns, the first being that measuring proximity to a post office as the crow flies does not accurately reflect the distance that people have to travel. It estimated that, if more accurate measurements were used, the UK Government would have failed five out of six of their own access tests. This is an attempt to pull the wool over people's eyes. The number of branches operating in the post office network has been tumbling, which is greatly affecting people's ability to access post office services, both rurally and in urban areas.

The Post Office's own figures show, between 2014-15 and 2017-18, performances getting worse in five of the six elements used to judge performance. There is no doubt that the postmaster crisis is a driving force behind access to branches and quality service, so what are the UK Government doing to improve access, while maintaining quality services?

Crown branch closures have also affected access. People can no longer access the full service that they had previously at their post office. Since 2013, the Crown network has been cut by a massive 60%. Although Crown branches make up only a small percentage of the branches in the post office network, they have historically

represented 10% to 20% of the Post Office's overall revenue. They therefore play a crucial role in the network's past, present and future, and must be preserved. These branches are flagship stores in prominent locations, so the impact on local communities, and the network generally, of closing them can be massive. Smaller, franchised branches often do not have the same presence in communities, provide the same level of service or offer workers the same conditions. In 2012, a report from Consumer Focus found a drop in performance; it concluded that franchising resulted in longer queuing, poorer customer service and advice, poorer disabled access, and a reduced number of counter positions.

When Crown branches are removed from prominent places in town centres, that removes yet another reason for people to visit their high street. That in turn reduces footfall and the likelihood of people spending on our high streets, as opposed to shopping online. The businesses surrounding Crown branches often benefit from being near a post office, which affects their income. Speak to any person from any town and they will complain about the state of their high street and closed units. What assessment have the Government made of the impact of Crown branch closures on town centres?

It is not just communities and sub-postmasters who are getting a rough deal from the current strategy—so are workers who are TUPE-ed over from a Crown branch to a franchise. The majority of workers being TUPE-ed opt to leave the profession, and take with them their skills and experience. In 2014-15, only 10 out of 400 staff were TUPE-ed over to a new retailer. In 2016, only six in 200 were TUPE-ed.

The Communication Workers Union has expressed concerns about conditions and the loss of skills. New jobs with franchising partners such as WHSmith are advertised at lower rates than the very same jobs with Post Office Ltd. That affects not only workers and their families, but the economy of the local community. According to the CWU, it makes more financial sense for franchise partners to offer a settlement to get Crown workers out the door, and bring in new staff in fewer positions, on lower pay and with poorer conditions.

The UK Government cannot be allowed to shake off their responsibility. Just because jobs are franchised, that does not mean that Ministers can turn a blind eye to the lower pay and conditions. Ministers have a duty to staff working directly and indirectly for Post Office Ltd. Will the Minister take action to prevent a two-tier system, and to bring everyone up, not down, to the same standard, regardless of the type of branch in which they work?

WHSmith has informed the CWU that once staff are TUPE-ed to their franchises, the CWU will no longer be recognised, so new and existing staff are not only being given a poorer deal, but are not even being given the means of improving their situation. They are being told to like it or lump it. Every workforce must have the right to union recognition. A stipulation for any new franchise contract must be that unions—the CWU and others—be recognised. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that?

The CWU has also expressed concerns about the fact that WHSmith was voted worst retailer on the high street in a 2018 poll by Which?. It has appeared in the bottom two in the Which? survey in each of the last

eight years. With that rating, customers cannot expect quality service, and workers cannot expect a quality employer. Given that these retailers are carrying out roles on behalf of the UK Government as the special shareholder of Post Office Ltd, what is the Minister's assessment of the quality of the service and rates provided by retailers such as WHSmith?

The recent decision to turn another 74 Crown post offices into franchises in WHSmith stores is alarming, particularly given reports that franchising is occurring without consultation with existing local post offices, meaning that the competition risks further destabilising the network. There have even been cases where a new franchise was opened in a WHSmith that was less than five minutes away from a post office branch, without there having been any consultation with the existing postmaster. Such decisions can have a devastating effect on a postmaster's income, and can lead to a branch closing. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that sub-postmasters are listened to, and that their branch's sustainability is taken into account in the decision-making process?

Communities must also be consulted, and any consultation must be meaningful. When the Post Office "consulted" people in Motherwell about the franchising of the town centre branch, it was merely a rubber-stamping exercise; I conducted my own consultation, which found that the post office was well used and well valued by the local community, but the Post Office pushed on with its plans anyway. A proper consultation would have required Post Office Ltd to listen and react to what it was told, but it has not done so. Nor have the Government: they have constantly palmed off the public and hon. Members with claims that anything that relates to the Post Office is a matter for the Post Office. Can the Minister outline what major steps the Post Office has taken in response to communities' reactions to Crown branch closures?

Last year, the Post Office's director of sales and trade marketing told the all-party parliamentary group on post offices that it had no contingency plans in case WHSmith—a company with 14 years of declining sales—goes bust, which would leave communities with no post office and leave Post Office Ltd floundering, deepening the postmaster crisis. With 596 branches, Martin McColl is the largest retail operator, while One Stop has 179, so Post Office Ltd may be guilty of putting all its eggs in one basket. Can the Minister outline her Department's contingency plans in case the larger retailers fail and their post office branches close along with them?

The post office network is being gutted by Post Office Ltd, and the UK Government are allowing it to happen. If the UK Government see a real future for post offices as a "front office for Government", the physical network must be supported to maintain services and attract more people to opt in. More Crown branches are closing and more mobile post offices are being deployed, which is not attractive and does not represent the strong public institution that people once knew.

The machinery and skills needed to perform certain services are being lost as Crown branches close. Not only are private providers of services not opting in, but neither are the UK Government. The Home Office has chosen not to renew its contract for biometric services with Post Office Ltd, which means that fewer people are visiting their post office and less money is being spent.

[*Marion Fellows*]

I accept that a competitive tendering process has to be undertaken, but why has Post Office Ltd not been competitive enough?

Will the Minister pledge to speak to her colleagues in the Home Office and other Departments about what services they can provide through the post office network? In their response to the 2017 consultation on the post office network, the UK Government pledged to look at what new products post offices could provide. New products serve not only communities but sub-postmasters, who can increase their income. New services could therefore be a way of preventing the mass exodus of postmasters. Since publishing their response, what products have the UK Government introduced? What products are being examined?

The preservation of existing services is important not only for the sustainability of the post office network and sub-postmasters' incomes, but for particularly vulnerable people. For example, people who use Post Office card accounts to withdraw social security payments rely massively on that service. Typically, people are taken to a bank in their youth by their parents to open an account, but that is simply not the case for everyone, especially those who are most vulnerable. I have assisted constituents who needed to open a bank account but were unable to—not because they did not want to, but because they held no recognised ID, as they would then be pursued for debts and put in an even more difficult position. How do the UK Government plan to support those people when the card account contract expires in 2021? A commitment must be made to extend the contract, not just until 2024 but indefinitely. People must have the choice. Not extending the contract would be a choice by this Government to place yet more barriers in front of people to prevent them from accessing the support that they need.

One key way in which the network can achieve longevity is through banking transactions. The proposal from the CWU, in conjunction with Cass Business School, to form a post bank deserves serious consideration. With more and more banks closing in our communities, a post bank could be a viable public alternative that provided customer service on people's doorsteps and in their communities while larger banks are abandoning them. It would require vision as well as will from the Government, but right now they have no vision—only a strategy for managed decline.

If the UK Government truly see a future for the post office network in which it can continue to have a prominent presence in town centres, so that people can still access an array of services, there needs to be a clear strategy. That strategy cannot simply be cuts dressed up as efficiency, or privatisation disguised as modernisation. The UK Government need to step up to the plate and ensure that this public service meets the standard that the public expect. Their key pledges must be to review sub-postmaster contracts, drastically increase and improve services, halt and reverse Crown branch franchising, commit to union recognition and better conditions for workers, actually listen to communities and sub-postmasters, develop a contingency plan in case retailers go bust, and assess the impact of the current strategy on town centres and vulnerable groups.

Fulfilling those pledges would be a major step towards a sustainable and doable strategy. However, I and many others have a suspicion that the Tories are overseeing the managed decline of the post office network as part of a deliberate strategy to underfund the service, making it poorer in order to lower confidence in it and justify a full-scale privatisation of the network. If that happened, I am sure it would be met with the same public opposition as the Crown closure plans.

The SNP believes that post offices should remain in our communities, that the franchising of Crown branches should be halted and that Crown branches should be re-established, so that people can enjoy more and better services, workers and sub-postmasters can enjoy better conditions, the post office network's sustainability can be ensured and the commonweal can be served. A public service should serve the public, not the aims and aspirations of people on retailers' executive boards or of Post Office Ltd, which is profiting from the feebleness of the UK Government, who refuse to act.

The post office network is in a postmaster crisis. The strategy of non-intervention is not coherent. Communities, sub-postmasters, workers and the network as a whole need action—and they need it now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. There are nine speakers on my list, including the Front Benchers. I am not minded to impose any time limit at this stage, but I wanted everybody to know the situation.

1.58 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing what is undoubtedly a very important debate.

I know from my constituents how important the post office network is to rural communities such as those that I represent in the Scottish borders. When the post office in Eyemouth closed temporarily last year, I received a huge number of complaints, letters and emails from residents worried about how they would access their benefits, pensions and other postal services. In fact, the reaction was as strong as the opposition to losing a local bank branch or another public service such as a local library. That desire to protect the local post office network needs to be put to good use. Local people certainly have a role to play in supporting their post offices, but I wonder how many people understand how postmasters earn a living. Perhaps we all need to do a better job of communicating that we all must use our post offices and spend money there as often as we can to ensure their survival.

I absolutely agree that the post office network provides an invaluable service, which needs to be protected. I find it hugely concerning that the National Federation of SubPostmasters has found that one in five sub-postmasters is considering closing or downsizing in the near future. What should our reaction and response be to that, and how should the Government react?

Tim McCormack, who lives in Coldstream in my constituency, ran the post office in Duns for a number of years. He has been a very vocal critic of the network

transformation project, and is calling for radical reform. There is clearly a need to look again at whether the current model has put post offices on a sustainable footing for the future. I urge the Minister and the Government to look closely at the issue. Do we need to increase the network subsidy? Can the Government do more to support postmasters who provide over-the-counter services on their behalf? For example, the Post Office's contract with the Department for Work and Pensions to provide the Post Office card account runs out in 2021. Will the Minister raise with Government colleagues the income and footfall that such services provide for postmasters, and press for the contract to be renewed for a further period?

I note your comments, Dame Cheryl, at the start of the debate about ongoing legal action, which is an important issue. I will not go into that case, but it is important that the Government consider the possible outcomes of that litigation, and how that might impact on the sustainability of the post office network. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw indicated, as banks have closed, a number of banking services have been transferred to the post office network. There would clearly be a big impact for many communities who are now completely dependent on the post office network if that network was not on the same footing as it is today.

Some have argued that the post office network in Scotland should be devolved to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. That is not something I support. That would cause all sorts of added costs, and would not in itself solve the problem. Of course, it is already open to the Scottish Government to provide financial assistance to post offices for providing non-postal services, so some extra support could be provided by Holyrood if—*[Interruption.]* Dame Cheryl, is this not telling? We are talking about a very serious issue here, which affects all our constituents, and all a group of SNP Members can do is to barrack and shout at someone who is trying to provide a constructive solution.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I am not going to allow any barracking. This will be a civilised debate under my chairmanship.

John Lamont: Thank you, Dame Cheryl. I am very grateful for your intervention. I think it is appropriate that we conduct ourselves in a civilised manner, and I am happy to do that.

Notwithstanding my concerns about the post office network, it is important to put the issue in context. Despite a significant reduction in the network subsidy since 2011, across Scotland we have lost just over 2% of post offices, which is roughly the same loss as has been experienced in England. In my constituency, we have lost two of 46 post offices. It is not the case that the network is falling apart.

The Post Office has gone from making a £120 million loss in 2012 to becoming profitable again, which is undoubtedly a good thing. I also very much welcome the recent announcement from the Post Office that it is increasing the amount of money it pays postmasters for carrying out banking transactions. That is clearly long overdue; the issue has long been a matter of complaint among postmasters in my constituency in the Scottish borders. I end by reiterating the importance of the post office network to rural communities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On rural communities, which is where the hon. Gentleman and I are coming from on this, should there not be an absolute commitment from this place, and from the Government, to safeguarding and securing what can be seen as the last bastion of social interaction for elderly and vulnerable people in isolated rural communities? The importance of that cannot be underlined enough.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman makes a critical point. For many communities and small towns across Scotland and the entire United Kingdom, the ability to access cash, financial services and benefits is critical. As banks and cash machines close, there are very often no other alternatives. It is critical that we in this place do something to ensure that people in those communities, including the most vulnerable older people, can continue to access such services, and to ensure that we can sustain our high streets, and shops and businesses in these communities, which are dependent on cash. The post office network is an important part of that. People are clearly using postal services differently, and that trend will inevitably continue, which reinforces the need for the UK Government to continue to monitor and review the sustainability of the network.

I conclude by again congratulating the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw on bringing this important debate.

2.6 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this debate and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing it. We all understand the value and importance of having post offices in our communities. More than 2 million small businesses—62%—use them at least once a month. In rural areas, they are vital; 36% of rural businesses use post offices weekly. One in four of all businesses are registered in rural areas and contribute well over £200 billion to our economy. Citizens Advice has been clear that eight in 10 small businesses in remote rural areas will lose money if local post offices close.

We all remember around 2008 when post offices were gradually being run down under the Labour Government of the day and when the services our local post offices could provide were wrested away from them, paving the way for mass closures. Long before I was elected in 2015, in 2008, I remember going round the doors in my constituency asking people to sign a petition to save their local post offices. I and other party activists did that in Skelmorlie, Glengarnock and Kilwinning. Naively, we thought we could make a difference. It turned out the Post Office's so-called consultations were not much more than a sham. To make it worse, our then local Labour MP voted on five separate occasions under the Blair Government to close post offices across the UK and then immediately afterwards put out press releases to the local papers lamenting the closure of our local post offices. Sometimes it is not hard to see why people become cynical about politics.

Some post offices are now being closed by stealth. By that, I mean that postmasters are either retiring or shutting up shop because it has become so difficult to make a living out of the business, important though that business is for our communities. Postmasters in my

[*Patricia Gibson*]

constituency tell me that they were earning minimum wage. We know from recent announcements that as of October 2019—although I do not know why it is taking so long—our sub-postmasters will receive better remuneration from the Post Office for the key services that they provide for the public. The question is whether that improved payment is enough for the long-term sustainability of the service, and we will have to reserve judgment on that.

Postmasters tell us that they hand count thousands of pounds daily. That money is accepted, checked, double-checked, bagged, remmed out and sent away, for much less money than the banks charge their customers. The gap is large, which means that either banks or the post office are making a lot of money on the back of postmasters. That does not seem fair to me.

Our postmasters are taking on a greater role in our communities as banks abandon our towns. Post offices are an important amenity in our communities and offer a lifeline on everything from pensions to benefits and, increasingly, day-to-day banking services. In so many towns, our post offices are the last place where face-to-face services are still available.

We all understand how important it is that banks properly remunerate postmasters for the services they provide to major banks, which turn over huge profits, and I am pleased that there will be a near-threefold increase on current rates. However, some postmasters in my constituency say this simply does not go far enough, which causes me a lot of concern. Indeed, we are all keen to see if the details of this offer are sufficient to protect our postmasters and, importantly, the network's sustainability as a whole. I have been lobbying the Government and the Post Office chief executive about this for two years, so I am delighted that we have at last made some progress, but the devil will be in the detail.

I have spoken out about the threat to our post office network in four different debates since I was first elected in 2015—we seem to have them once a year. It is an issue that I campaigned on with Scottish National party activists in my community long before I was elected, and I will continue to do so until our postmasters get the fair deal that they deserve. Our post offices are too important to be left to flounder at the mercy of banks that are apparently too big to fail, and of successive UK Governments who have consistently failed to recognise the importance of post offices to our communities.

Jim Shannon: I want to put on record what a very good campaign the Scottish National party and others have run on behalf of the banks that are closing, and the importance of post offices in filling that gap. Over time, their campaign has outlined and highlighted the issue of banks closing at a fast rate, which means that the importance of post offices is increasing. It is so important.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that observation and very much welcome it.

Carol Monaghan: My hon. Friend talks about the importance of post offices to our communities. In fact, we talk about them as a public service. Does she share my concerns about hearing talk of profit or loss? Public

services cost money and must be invested in. We should not consider profit when we are talking about a vital community lifeline.

Patricia Gibson: When we talk about profits in relation to public services, there is always the danger that we understand the value of a pound, but not the value of something that cannot be measured in pounds, shillings and pence.

The failure to recognise the value of post offices to our communities can be seen in the fact that 74 Crown post offices have been franchised in WHSmith stores. There are reports that franchising is being done without proper consultation with existing post offices, which means that the competition risks further destabilising the network. There must be strategic consideration of franchising. In addition, it is deeply concerning that the Post Office appears to have admitted that there is no contingency plan in the event of the collapse of WHSmith, which has continued to decline over the past 14 years. There is no contingency plan should WHSmith collapse. What does that say about the strategic planning to protect our post offices? I suggest it says rather a lot.

The UK Government seem to have a pattern of abdicating responsibility for this matter, insisting that it is a matter for the Post Office. That paved the way for the Government to insist latterly that they could do nothing about the banks, which we owned as taxpayers, fleeing our towns. There is a pattern emerging here. At the heart of this debate must be the recognition that the post office network has a vital role in the day-to-day lives of many of our constituents—older people generally, and often the most vulnerable in society. The SNP believes that the Post Office must be more than a commercial entity and must serve a distinct social purpose. The Government must commit to a programme that ensures there are no post office closures, and urgently renew their funding of the network to safeguard its future.

Post Office branches are hugely important to older people. The services offered are a lifeline. People pay bills, access their benefits and get advice. Older people and those on low incomes make greater use of cash and banking services and bill payment services, and vulnerable groups and remote rural residents use post offices for informal community services, such as support and information—they are touchstones of our communities.

It is not good enough for the Post Office to have been managed into decline in the way it has been. For too long our post offices have been undermined and undervalued, and our postmasters underpaid. As a result, some of our most valued post offices are being closed by stripping away their sustainability and then earmarking them for closure. Now, in a new era, we need them more than ever. The neglect and indifference have to stop. It is time to pay our postmasters properly and to stand up for them. It is time to stop the rot and see our postmasters for what they are: community champions who are often not missed until they are gone, struggling on to survive in a hostile business environment where making a living of any kind is increasingly challenging. That needs to be recognised and saluted.

The Minister said in a recent Adjournment debate that her Government support postmasters, and that this is evidenced by a pledge in their election manifesto. I

hope she is listening and will discuss with her colleagues in Government what more she can do to show their support than just having a line in a manifesto. We need a positive and concrete set of actions.

2.15 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this debate. Before I became an MP, we stood together to fight for the Brandon Street post office in Motherwell. It was a very good Crown post office and well supported by the local community—even more so by the local shops, which got involved in collecting petitions. They did a very good job, but it was not good enough for the Post Office.

I want to make hon. Members aware of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am currently on a five-year career break from Royal Mail, where I worked for 28 years before being elected to the House. I am a proud member of the Communication Workers Union, and I wish it all the best for its conference in Bournemouth next week. I welcome delegates in the Public Gallery, who are here to hear this debate.

Throughout my career as a postal worker, I have seen at first hand the clear benefits of having Royal Mail and the Post Office as a unified public service serving all communities across the UK. That is why I fought against the privatisation of Royal Mail for over 20 years. I resisted attempts by successive Governments to fragment and privatise postal services. However, the Tory-Lib Dem coalition was eventually successful in privatising Royal Mail in 2013. They sold off a vital public asset that serves the public good, and undervalued it in the process—it was the biggest post office robbery. There are competing estimates of the real cost of privatising Royal Mail; one suggests that it cost taxpayers around £1 billion.

I have said it before, and I will say it again: Royal Mail was not for sale. I am proud that the next Labour Government have committed to bringing Royal Mail back into public ownership. It is time that Royal Mail once again runs in the interests of the people, and is not used to maximise private profits. Despite the privatisation of Royal Mail, Post Office Ltd was kept in public ownership, but recent years have been marked by constant attacks on the post office network. The result has been a steady fall in the number of Crown post offices since 2013, and they now make up just 2% of the overall network. Some of those closures were justified by arguments about protecting other post offices from closure in the future. We accepted that, but we now face a new threat to our Crown post offices: franchising.

The Government are planning to sell 74 Crown post offices to WHSmith through the franchising process. Is WHSmith a suitable company to take on the responsibility for providing postal services? As we have already heard, it is a company that consumers voted the worst retailer on the British high street. Far from sustaining the post office network, franchising will further its decline. Does the Minister still consider WHSmith an appropriate franchise partner for the Post Office in the light of its seeking to derecognise the CWU, which supports the interests of all staff, including the postmasters? I hope she can provide an answer.

Staff will have to endure low pay and cuts to their terms and conditions, and consumers can look forward to lower service standards. However, I am encouraged by the public, who are fighting back against the threat posed by franchising. Some 92,000 people have signed a petition in support of the CWU's Save Our Post Office campaign—Labour is on their side, and I thank them for signing the petition. We will end post office closures and stop this unnecessary franchising process in its tracks.

The Government have said that modernising the post office network is vital to ensure its sustainability, yet the modernisation programme has been a smokescreen for post office closures and staff redundancies, and is failing on its own terms. Post Office revenues are falling—revenue from Government, mail, retail and financial services all declined in 2017-18. The truth is that the post office network is struggling because of a loss of post offices and staff through the alleged modernisation. We have lost many skilled workers.

We cannot allow the post office network to decline further because communities across the UK rely on it. The Government's own survey of the post office network in 2016 found that 95% of people use a local post office at least once per year. Almost 60% were unaware of any alternatives to post offices when it came to assessing standard postal services. If the Government continue to push the post office network into decline, the most vulnerable people and communities in our country will pay the price.

It is important to reflect on the fact that the post office network has changed in many respects. One of the most notable changes is the growing role of sub-postmasters, who now run 98% of the post office network, yet the Government expect them to run their post offices with ever-decreasing levels of funding. The Post Office's 2017-18 annual report highlighted that there has been a 4.5% reduction in funding for sub-postmasters. I have been contacted by many sub-postmasters in my constituency who have felt the reduction in funding—one in particular. The sub-postmasters in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill are angry.

I was recently contacted by a sub-postmaster who wanted to share his experience. His staffing costs are significantly higher than the remuneration that he receives from the Post Office Ltd. As we lose bank branches, residents increasingly rely on his post office to carry out their banking transactions. That is proving costly and time-consuming, yet no financial support from the Post Office Ltd is available to him to provide those banking services. On his behalf, I ask the Government to review commission rates and remuneration for sub-postmasters. I hope the Minister is listening and will take that forward.

If sub-postmasters are not properly supported, I fear we will see the loss of more post offices in our communities. That is not just a threat; it is what we are being told. Public demand on the post office network is changing, particularly as a result of the loss of banking services in communities across the UK. Banks are closing, and post offices have to pick up the pieces. I welcome Labour's commitment to establish post office banks, including 300 in Scotland.

I pay tribute to the work of the CWU, of which I am a proud member. I have stood alongside CWU reps and members in many disputes, fighting proposed post office closures and cuts to staff terms and conditions. I will

[Hugh Gaffney]

continue to stand alongside them inside and outside this House. The fight to rebuild a publicly owned and unified postal network continues. It must be won for all communities across the UK.

2.23 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, for this important debate on the sustainability of the post office network. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing it and on her excellent contribution, which highlighted the ongoing crisis in the Post Office and the pressure faced by those who have to work in extremely difficult circumstances to deliver a service on which so many of our constituents rely.

There have been some excellent contributions, none more so than that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). The Government should be in no doubt about the strength of feeling about this issue and the support that the post office has from Members of all parties. I share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, who said that the post office network is being run down and set up for future privatisation, which would have absolutely catastrophic consequences, particularly for those of us who represent and live in rural communities.

I hope the Government take heed of what is being said here today and start to show the level of commitment required to sustain—and, indeed, grow—the post office network. As we have heard, it is a lifeline service for many people living in rural areas, such as my constituency of Argyll and Bute—a vast area covering more than 7,000 sq km and taking in 26 inhabited island communities.

I have my doubts about whether that will be the case. Last month, when responding to an Adjournment debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), the Minister said that, under this Government, the post office network is

“at its most stable in decades”,

and that

“Government funding required to sustain the network has drastically decreased and is set to decrease even further in future years.”—[*Official Report*, 27 March 2019; Vol. 657, c. 477.]

That is not the message that my constituents want to hear from the Government. The Government have achieved what they describe as stability, but we in Argyll and Bute have lost 20% of our post offices in the past 13 years. In the past two years, six post offices have closed their doors, yet the Government still say they plan to decrease funding drastically in the coming years. We can have no faith in them.

Our rural communities know how important local post offices are in sustaining already economically fragile parts of the country. I am afraid that, as with so many other areas of their lives, when it comes to protecting the rural post office network, they can have no faith that the UK Government will act in their best interests.

It is not just the ongoing threat of closure that threatens many of our rural post offices, but the additional workload being placed on them as high street banks

abandon rural Scotland as fast as their desire to make a quick buck will carry them. In the time remaining to me, I want to look at the effect that bank closures are having on the rural post office network. Small rural post offices, which are often community-run, were not designed, and are simply ill-equipped, to replace long-established banks. I want to use as an example the community post office in the village of Cairndow.

Cairndow sits on the shores of Loch Fyne, and is situated 10 miles from Lochgoilhead and Inveraray. Several years ago, the community identified the need for a post office in the village, and in 2015, thanks to the dedicated hard work of local people and Here We Are, a local third-sector organisation, the people of Cairndow celebrated the opening of their brand new community-run post office. The new venture has been hugely successful, and I pay tribute to the people at Here We Are and the entire community of Cairndow for what they have achieved.

It is not all good news. Because of a seemingly endless programme of bank branch closures in Argyll and Bute—most notably, the Royal Bank of Scotland's decision last year to close the last bank in the town of Inveraray—what was a small community-run post office designed simply to meet the needs of a small rural population has become a replacement bank.

Although the post office at Cairndow has always been more than happy to provide a banking service to small local businesses that cannot manage the 60-mile round trip to the nearest bank in Dunoon or Lochgilphead, it fears that it is now in danger of becoming swamped. It has become the bank of choice for many large international businesses that operate in the local area. It reports that its levels of cash-handling have gone through the roof in recent months, as has the amount of time staff have to devote to it. So much of its time is now taken up providing banking facilities for people: it feels that its core business—providing a post office service—is suffering as a result. As we have heard, it is not even as if the efforts to provide that extra service are well rewarded. It is being asked to fill the gaps left by high street banks as they desert rural Scotland.

After all, it is that post office, along with other rural post offices, that has to shoulder the burden of all the additional security concerns. It now holds a great deal more money than it ever had before, and it has had to put appropriate measures in place for the increased cash on the premises. Despite all that extra banking work and the extra security concerns that come with it, it receives scant reward for providing that increased level of service. As one leading member of Here We Are at Cairndow said to me just yesterday,

“We didn't set this up to become a community bank. We set this up as a community post office, and now we feel as if we are subsidising both the bank and the Post Office.”

When the Minister responds, I would appreciate it if she advised those people at Cairndow that something practical will be put in place to ensure that they are able to continue as a community post office, rather than having the burden of being a replacement bank forced on them. Despite the loss of 20% of my constituents' rural post offices in the last 13 years and the funding cuts that the Minister has announced, will she provide a cast-iron guarantee to them that there will be no more post office closures in Argyll and Bute?

2.31 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important debate. I was pleased to go along to the Backbench Business Committee—my old hunting ground—to support her application. I am delighted that she spoke so well to set out the many issues that post offices face, both now and in the future.

In my own work on post office sustainability, I have concentrated on two things: the deeply unjust banking transaction rates paid by the banks to the post office, and the definition of community post offices, which is unfair to many post offices that are community in practice but not in definition. I was encouraged by the level of interest in those issues in my recent Adjournment debate.

I take this opportunity to apologise to the Minister: my 12-and-a-half-minute speech ended up taking nearly 10 minutes longer than that because of the sheer number of interventions—it was one of the more popular Adjournment debates. That left her insufficient time to respond to the many points and questions that were raised. Hopefully, she will have sufficient time to answer those questions today.

I pointed out during that debate that negotiations were under way between the banks and the Post Office on remuneration. I asked the Government, as owners of the Post Office, to apply pressure to ensure that the rates were fair. That uplift would help ensure the sustainability of our local post offices. On that occasion, the Minister did not give any indication that they would do so, perhaps because of the lack of time. That debate followed a long engagement with concerned sub-postmasters in my constituency, and I know that other hon. Members have had plenty of engagement in their constituencies across Scotland and the UK.

I have been in almost constant engagement with the Post Office on this matter, and I wrote to Ministers and 16 of the biggest banks. The majority of banks responded positively, but one of our biggest banks said that it was not directly involved in negotiations, and that UK Finance was representing the industry and could give further details. That was news to UK Finance, which said:

“UK Finance is not party to negotiations and therefore cannot comment on the specifics of what is a commercial matter.”

I wonder whether that bank—I will not say which bank for fear of embarrassing it, but it is one of the UK's biggest—was actually party to those negotiations at all.

Despite all that, I was very pleased that last week, following the constructive engagement of the National Federation of SubPostmasters, many Members of this House and the CWU, the Post Office announced that, from October 2019, it will raise the rates of payment that sub-postmasters receive for taking personal and business banking deposits. Those increases represent nearly a threefold uplift on current rates and were warmly welcomed by sub-postmasters at the NFSP conference.

That is a great win for post offices, and, as my hon. Friend said, it is a significant first step towards securing their long-term financial future. One wrinkle remains: the different rates passed on by Post Office Ltd to the various types of post office—local or community, for example. Further engagement with Post Office Ltd on that issue is still required to ensure a level playing field.

That announcement came during the NFSP conference, which resulted in other good news in that, for the second year running, the NFSP Mails Segregation Team's work has improved sub-postmasters' mails segregation performance, resulting in a bonus payment of £1.8 million that will be shared among sub-postmasters. The NFSP has said that it will continue to work with their sub-postmasters, with the aim of increasing the size of any future payment and, as I said, it welcomes the changes to this key area of remuneration, which are a significant first step.

The NFSP stressed, however, that there are still some areas of concern to be addressed, including the level of public and business knowledge of the many services that the Post Office provides. Now that it receives a fairer deal for providing some of those key services, it is to its advantage to provide those services to a higher number of customers. That is especially the case with banking services.

Another area of concern, which has been mentioned, is safety. Further changes are required to help protect postmasters from the risks associated with handling large volumes of cash. That has come up in my visits to local post offices and meetings with sub-postmasters.

As we have heard, the post office is a community institution in Scotland and across the UK. As countless household names slip away from the high streets, the post office remains ever present, providing not only postal services, which have become a declining proportion of its business, but benefits administration, banking services and useful public spaces, fewer and fewer of which are now available.

Many of our post offices face increasing pressure and long-term financial uncertainty. In our modern, digital world, with Amazon, online groceries and deliveries, and online banking, many of our small village and town centres—particularly in rural and semi-rural areas—face systemic degradation and challenges unlike anything they have seen before. That comes at a time when large and profitable banks are upping sticks and leaving the high street, so that the Post Office, which already had an important role in our communities, has only become more important and prominent.

The community designation of post offices is a good thing. The Government currently provide funding, administered by the Post Office, to many small town and village post offices once they have received that designation. Designations have to have rules, and the problem is that many rural and semi-rural post offices miss out, while some city post offices, which do not need the additional assistance, meet the criteria. The rules by which branches qualify are set by the Government.

In theory, that funding is supposed to protect those post offices that are the last shop that can provide post office services to the community. However, those criteria are perhaps a little too black and white. One criterion is the distance from any given post office to the next one—a three-mile minimum that is calculated in total ignorance of the situation on the ground. Two post offices in my constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire North are affected by that: in Bridge of Weir and in Houston.

The Bridge Community Centre in Bridge of Weir—where, incidentally, I have a constituency advice surgery on Saturday morning at 10.30, should anybody need

[Gavin Newlands]

any assistance—[*Interruption.*] Other surgeries are available, I am sure. That centre is the perfect model for what a real community post office should be; it is run by the local community for the local community. However, because of the three-mile rule, it does not qualify for any community designation funding. The public transport links, which were previously poor, have been slashed in recent months. The centre also does not qualify because there are other retailers in the village who could provide that service, but the fact is that no other retailer in Bridge of Weir wanted to take on the Post Office franchise.

The next closest post office is a 10-minute walk from the nearest bus stop, assuming that someone has been able to catch one of the very infrequent buses and has waited God knows how long to get a bus back to the village. The community was left with a choice: have no local post office, or take it on themselves. They chose the latter, and should be commended for doing so and provided with some assistance. The situation is made worse by the importance of local post offices to the elderly and those with additional support needs. Many people who fall into both groups may already have extra difficulty getting around.

Today, and at other times, I have heard similar stories emerging from other constituencies. The community subsidy remains vital and supports many branches that might not otherwise be commercially viable. Under current plans, the Government subsidy to the Post Office is due to be cut in the coming year and to end entirely in 2021. I strongly urge the Minister to reconsider that course of action, or many more community post offices will close and many communities be left with no post office and no bank.

As we have heard, post offices are closing, and those closures disproportionately affect Scotland. Forty post offices closed in Scotland between 2011 and March last year, compared with 297 in England. When we take population into account, Scotland's closure rate is one third higher than that south of the border. Given Scotland's unique and challenging geography, which includes 94 inhabited islands, keeping viable post offices in place is clearly of even greater importance to Scotland than to other parts of the UK.

In conclusion, we must recognise that the local post office is disproportionately important to small towns and rural communities. It has been an institution and often a community lifeline through centuries of change and turmoil. The modern age has not made things any easier for the post office, but I am confident that if the right action is taken it will continue to play its important and irreplaceable role.

I agree with many colleagues from different parties that privatisation is not the answer to that challenge—the Post Office must remain in public hands—and the Government must recognise their role in it. Yes, a Post Office banking deal is a large step in the right direction, but there is plenty more to do, and for my constituents one decisive action that the Government could take swiftly is to review the community designation to pay fairly and pay the right people so that more post offices remain sustainable and stay open for our communities.

2.41 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important debate on a critical issue facing many of our constituencies and the nation as a whole.

If we reflect on the decade since the financial crash, in order to avoid wholesale collapse of the UK's banking system, there has been increasing reliance on the post office network, but an unsustainable model is being visited upon that network. Earlier this year, I met my local postmasters—who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) pointed out, now represent 98% of post office provision—and they were concerned about the franchising model for the Crown post offices. Of the post offices in my constituency, Possilpark across the road from my constituency office is franchised to a grocery shop; Springburn is still a Crown office but has been actively advertised for franchising; Dennistoun was franchised last year and is now in a grocery store; and Millerston closed and only recently has been advertised for franchising, so that it can reopen.

I first met the chap who took over the Crown office franchise in Dennistoun during the consultation. He was very upbeat and optimistic. He is a young man, an entrepreneur, looking to make a good go of it as a small businessman. I thought that his ideas sounded interesting, and he had some impressive plans for how to lay out the new facility across the road as part of a grocery shop. When he came to see me again earlier this year, I was saddened to hear how he had been “totally conned”—his words—by how the contract was set up.

The main concern was the viability of operations because of the reduction in funding and resource. For example, postmasters now have to rent ATMs at £8,500 per year, with business rates on that. The stores' income from these machines is only £7,500 per annum, so postmasters pay £1,000 a year to run them. That is madness from their point of view. Why on earth would they do that?

The Government have invested £1.3 billion in the post office network, but I am afraid that that money has not fed down to the franchise holders. The withdrawal of RBS entirely from my constituency was followed by the recent announcement that Santander will close its last branch in the constituency. It has said, “Don't worry: the post office network will take up the slack,” but that network does not look too resilient, and it certainly does not look like it has a promising prospect of picking up the slack.

Banking contracts with the new post office franchises have changed. Postmasters used to receive 70p per £100 to provide banking services, but they now only receive 31p per £100, which is clearly a massive change and financially unsustainable. That has combined with the huge restrictions that have been imposed on credit unions extending their bonds so that they can bail each other out. In the past few months, my constituency has lost a credit union. Previously, other credit unions could rally around to share capital so as to avoid one union failing, but the big banking lobbies have prevented that with the current restrictions. As a Co-op MP, I see a picture in which changes to commercial banking, restrictions on co-ops and the huge undermining of the post office

network have been severely detrimental to local finances. That combination has been a toxic recipe for the provision of banking services across this country.

Earnings for post office franchise holders and sub-postmasters have been eroded to such an extent that they believe that cash starvation will lead to the closure of many post office outlets. They think that post offices should go back to the model in which they were run as Crown offices. Many of them clearly cannot wait for the franchise contract to end, so that they can simply walk away from it. It is so toxic for them that they cannot wait to throw away the key and board up the premises. That is the sad situation. At the start, there was a great deal of hope, with entrepreneurs trying to make a fist of it, but they were undermined by how the contracts have worked out, which is a great tragedy.

Postmasters in my constituency believe that their ability to provide a service and employment in the area has been severely eroded, and that retail operations within the franchises are not enough to avoid closure and to survive. It is a real cliff edge. The worry is that when this phase of contracts expires, we will see a massive collapse in the post office network. This is a ticking time bomb. Unless the Minister recognises the cracks that are appearing in the structure of the system, we will see a massive failure of the post office network within the next five years. The Minister needs to be aware that a crisis is brewing in that network.

If the Minister is interested in dealing with the situation, the contracts should be renegotiated—as the sub-postmasters who saw me believe—to allow not only service provision but the ability to earn a reasonable living. That is not a great ask of Government. They just want to run a business that is genuinely sustainable, and to earn a small profit—a living—so that people are happy. That is not how it works now, because the dice are loaded against them.

The CWU, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill is a proud member, actively opposed the franchising of the Crown post offices. However, the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters was in essence bought off by Post Office Ltd—sub-postmasters were paid into, but part of the conditions of those payments was that the national federation would not undertake any activity that undermined the reputation of the Post Office and brought it into disrepute. It is a trade union in name only—it is a sham.

If the Minister is serious about proper scrutiny, sub-postmasters need to be given proper independent recognition as workers, and to be allowed to organise in proper trade union fashion. That would be a helpful measure to improve scrutiny of the system. Employees of the post office network believe that they are 39% underpaid for their efforts. Clearly, where there is underrepresentation of workers and organised labour, there is underpayment and exploitation, and as my local sub-postmasters illustrated to me, that is exactly what has happened.

The situation reflects the wider issues of investment in banking in this country. In 2016, public and private investment levels in the UK stood at 17% of GDP. We are ranked 24th out of the 28 EU countries, and a pathetic 118th in the world rankings. That is a shabby

record for the UK, and it speaks to the wider crisis in our economic potential as a country. We need to get a grip of that urgently.

That is why I welcomed the post bank proposal released at the beginning of April, which gained great press attention and traction as a credible and costed idea that would not only ensure the sustainability of the post office network, but create a reliable high street banking facility owned and run for the public interest. It is a plan to revolutionise the banking ecosystem, and to address the serious issues that we face, by, for example, ending the failing partnership between the Post Office and the Bank of Ireland. That partnership was forged after a massive public bail-out of the bank, and a condition of it was an exit from business banking activity. As a result, the Post Office is not able to grow its market share in small and medium-sized enterprise lending, and to help the growth of local businesses, which is stifled by a lack of lending. If we combine that with the restrictions on the credit union network, we see a recipe for constraining the growth of our economy and business activity in the UK.

That issue would be a priority for the new post bank, which would be welcome news for the sub-postmasters in my constituency and many others around the country. The post bank, which would be seeded with £2.5 billion in capital, is not controversial at all. Indeed, 65% of the public support the reintegration and renationalisation of the Royal Mail and the post office network as a unified whole. The UK's own version, Girobank, was privatised as part of the great fire sale of assets by the Tories in the 1990s, even though a fifth of people worldwide have banking services through post office networks in their respective countries.

The new model for the post office network would be larger by far than any of the existing bank and building society networks. There would be 300 branches in Scotland alone. A post bank would be embedded in local communities, and would be given a decentralised decision-making structure, and a specific mandate to support small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprise, tackle financial exclusion and promote inclusive economic development. It would be a lending arm of the proposed new national investment bank that Labour also plans to launch, and therefore would lead to a wholesale restructuring and repositioning of the UK economy, enabling patient finance to be seeded in our communities, and enabling greater vitality in communities that have seen significant industrial and economic decline over the last 40 years.

A solution is clearly at hand that would save our post office network and provide banking services where high street banks have disappeared. It would use a new banking model that is far more sustainable and will lead to far greater stability, growth and prosperity across the United Kingdom. I urge the Minister to take those proposals seriously, if she has any serious interest in addressing the crisis facing our post office network and those who work in it.

2.51 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this debate on a matter that is

[Drew Hendry]

critical for many communities in Scotland and the other nations of the UK. She talked about the respect for, and recognition of, post offices. Few things upset communities more than a post office closure. She also pointed out the folly of the Tory Government's non-intervention policy, and the parlous state of sub-postmasters, following the cuts that they have had to endure to their livelihoods.

My hon. Friend rightly mentioned that it is good news that there is a new banking transaction deal, but why the six-month wait? There is no good reason for that. It should happen now. She talked about the consequences of poor pay, and the 1,016 temporarily closed branches, 134 of which—some 13%—are in Scotland. She talked about the effect of Crown branch closures, and the failure of the franchising system to recognise unions, which others mentioned, too.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) talked about his worried constituents and the desire to protect the network. It is a telling figure that one in five sub-postmasters is considering closing or reducing their services. His speech was good up to then—until he said, as is usual for the Tories, that he wants the Scottish Government to pick up after the failure of the Westminster Tory Government, without the powers or levers to be able to do so.

John Lamont: My point was that powers are available to the Scottish Government to support the provision of financial services through the post office network—a point that the Library has just confirmed. There are opportunities available to the Scottish Government to provide additional assistance beyond what the UK Government can provide, because post offices are a reserved matter. There are levers and powers available to the Scottish Government, if they choose to use them.

Drew Hendry: I do not intend to go too far off track, but I must respond. It is absolutely typical of the Tories to say that we have to fix every mess and failure at the expense of the Scottish public and services in Scotland. That is a ridiculous proposition.

Returning to the core debate, there was enormous consensus among hon Members. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) pointed out that businesses across communities lose money if post offices close. She said that people are cynical about the politics of the Westminster Government, who make no commitment to post offices and then wring their hands at the consequences. She talked about hand-counting thousands daily, and everything that involves. She talked about the post office being the last place for face-to-face contact in communities. It is more than just a commercial entity, and older and more vulnerable people are the most affected by closures.

It is telling that Later Life Ambitions, a pensioners' organisation, points out that the post office is important in day-to-day life, because older people, who are often the most vulnerable people in society, rely on post offices. They are a lifeline; they offer access to pensions and benefits, and let people pay bills, get advice and even socialise. Does the Minister acknowledge that this is a social issue, too? For those who do not or cannot communicate digitally, post offices are very important. They are used by 42% of consumers over 65, and 31% of disabled consumers.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) talked about working with my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, and about post offices needing to be run in the interests of people. That is absolutely correct. In talking about franchising policy, he highlighted that WHSmith has been voted worst retailer. It is notable that the jobs it advertises are particularly low-paying.

In a very telling speech that hit home with me as a fellow MP representing a rural community in the highlands and islands, my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) shared concerns that post offices are being run down and prepared for privatisation. He talked about the catastrophic effect that can have on rural communities, particularly in the highlands and islands, where often there are huge distances between the services that people rely on. My hon. Friend talked about the stability policy of the UK Government; Argyll and Bute has lost 20% of its post offices, with six post office closures in the last two years. The drastically reduced funding has put post offices in a very vulnerable place, and the public have no faith in the UK Government protecting rural post office services. He was also right to point out the success of Cairndow, and to congratulate those people on taking matters positively into their own hands to try to do something for their communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) talked about the transaction charges, and so he should, because his work should be commended. I congratulate him on forcing action, not only through his Adjournment debate, but through continued pressure and engagement. He talked about the impact of the systemic degradation of services in towns and villages and, importantly, the issue of community designation. It is a good thing to have community designation, but the problem is that rural and semi-rural post offices are losing out, while cities can gain. The criteria are too black and white, especially the three-mile rule.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) talked about the unsustainable model imposed on the post office network, and shared his concerns about franchising. When there are bank closures in our communities, we have all been told, "Don't worry; the post office network will pick up the slack." He also talked about the toxic conditions for the people who run post offices, many of whom got into the job because they thought it was a great thing to do for their communities, a proper career and a valued position in the community. My goodness, how they have been let down by how they have been treated. He predicted a massive failure over the next five years if there is no action.

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Post offices are not just business; they are focal points for many communities. This issue is about communities and their health and wellbeing, as well as the national and local economic impact. For many, the shiniest jewel in the crown has been prised out and cut up for the profit of those who do not rely on or even need a post office. In 2017, Citizens Advice found that people valued their community post office more than a local pub, a bank branch or a library. Does the Minister acknowledge that importance? In rural areas, 36% of businesses use post offices at least weekly, and 62% of small businesses use them at least once a month. Over 500,000 businesses

are registered in rural areas—that is one in four companies—and they contribute more than £200 billion to the economy. These people are creatives and innovators who use post offices to send goods and pay bills. According to Citizens Advice, eight out of 10 of them will lose money if local post offices are closed. Will the Minister take notice of that?

We in the SNP—and others, as we have heard—are clear that we want our Post Office to remain robust, and to serve our businesses and communities, but that is not a priority under the UK Government's management. Consequently, the Government should devolve power to us to ensure that the Post Office is protected. Under the current policy, there has been a mass exodus of postmasters, often leaving communities branchless. My hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw should be commended for arguing for fair hourly rates for postmasters, but the Minister must undertake to commission independent analysis and answer the big questions about fairness.

As we have heard, pay levels are leading to a major exodus of postmasters. Rather than watch the Post Office crumble, the UK Government should support postmasters and ensure fair remuneration. As was pointed out, the publicly owned Post Office's North Star initiative is aiming for a £100 million profit by 2021. That is all very good, but postmasters' pay has declined by £107 million since 2012. The majority of postmasters now earn less than the minimum wage. In many cases, they cannot even get out; their businesses are now too unattractive to sell.

The National Federation of SubPostmasters has raised the issue of sub-post office closures with the UK Government and the Government-owned Post Office Ltd. The federation's spokesperson said:

“Our records show around two-thirds of closures are due to the resignation of the sub-postmaster— and a survey of our members conducted earlier this year gives an insight into why sub-postmasters are resigning. Income is dropping over time, the majority earn less than the national minimum wage for running their post office—and therefore earn less per hour than their staff—and as many as a third took no time off last year.

We agree with Marion Fellows that Scotland has been hit hard by sub-post office closures. This is a particular problem for rural areas in Scotland, as well as across the UK, where people rely on their local post office for vital postal and banking services.”

Action on transaction charges is welcome, but why wait? Why not give the same rates to local branches and main post offices? Around 90% of post offices in the highlands and islands are local branches, not main post offices. Will the Minister challenge that with the Post Office? As my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw pointed out, there must be a vision for the post bank, and it should be properly funded.

There is more pressure on post offices than ever, given the loss of local banks through short-sighted closures by the Royal Bank of Scotland, Halifax Bank of Scotland and others. Now we find that TSB is starting the process of shortening hours, which is always the cynical first move in reducing a branch's viability to the point where its closure can be justified. As we heard, all those banks say, “It's okay, you can use the post office,” but we cannot if they have gone.

Even where post offices remain, Robert Cockburn, a constituent of mine who runs the post office in Drumnadrochit, says the workload is absolutely punishing. He often has to run his business as a single-manned

operation, so while he goes behind the screen for the time it takes to deal with a transaction, he loses out on custom from people who come to his business and might have bought goods to help sustain him.

Brendan O'Hara: While we have been sitting here, I have received an email informing me that yet another bank branch in Argyll and Bute is planning to cut its numbers ahead, I believe, of closure. The TSB branch in Dunoon now says its customers have to travel what it calls 7 miles to their nearest branch, seemingly unaware that that journey involves a ferry and a bus. Yet again, it is death by 1,000 cuts to financial services in rural Scotland. Will my hon. Friend join me in utterly condemning that latest move.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I join him very robustly in condemning that move. As I said a moment ago, shortening hours is the first step towards making a branch unviable so it can no longer do business. The call then goes out, “Don't worry, the post office will pick up the slack.” As we know, that is not always the case.

My constituent Mr Cockburn says it is punishing to run his post office. He told me:

“It is a combination of everything. The work that we have is onerous and does not pay enough money to cover your time. The business banking, for example, we get paid 23p per £1,000 that we count. That's nothing. You think, on minimum wage, how long it takes you to count £1,000. If you make a mistake or”—

more commonly—

“if the customer's made a mistake you have to double check it. We get paid for taking a parcel over the counter, but the Post Office took 6% away from us on that because they gave us a faster printer and said we could print labels faster. It's ridiculous.”

A rural post office gets to print a label faster, and the Post Office cuts its money for doing so. That is ridiculous.

The UK Government must ensure that there are more incentives for new and existing postmasters to maintain and open post offices. Union officials rightly have been clear about the folly of closing Crown offices and franchising the service. As we have heard, franchises often advertise jobs at a lower rate than the Post Office pays. As the all-party parliamentary group on post offices found, the Post Office has no back-up plan in the event of WHSmith failing to deliver the service.

I hope the Minister has taken clear cognisance of what has been said during the debate by people representing their constituencies and communities, the vulnerable people who need these services most, and the postmasters who are being forced into subsistence living and locked into a business they simply cannot afford to get out of. This is a matter of having a social conscience and ensuring that communities have something they can rely on, not just now but into the future. If post offices are going to have to pick up the slack of bank closures and other things, they should be allowed to become sustainable in order to do that job.

3.7 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important debate. She is an ardent advocate for her community and speaks passionately about the importance of post

[Gill Furniss]

offices to our local communities. I also thank the CWU, the National Federation of SubPostmasters and all those individuals who work very hard in a cross-party and collegiate way—they know who they are.

The post office is an important bastion in our local communities. It is a long-standing British institution, trusted and loved by the public. It is there for individuals as well as local businesses. Polls by Citizens Advice and others show that the post office is one of the most important services in the local community and, as many have pointed out, it is vital for rural communities. One in five rural residents said in response to a Citizens Advice survey that they would lose contact with friends or neighbours were it not for the post office.

Importantly, post offices are often a lifeline for older people in our communities. Later Life Ambitions, an umbrella group representing more than a quarter of a million pensioners, is clear about the significant importance of the post office to the security, independence, mental health and wellbeing of older people. It stated:

“The Post Office matters to older people both for the services it provides directly to them, but also for the role it plays in supporting the local businesses on which older people often rely.”

Indeed, at a time when our high streets are struggling, the post office is an important economic backbone for our local high streets. It offers small businesses the opportunity to do business locally and provides that important link that ties in the community. More than ever, we need to protect and encourage the growth of post offices. Unfortunately, the Government are overseeing a managed decline of the service.

Since 2010 we have seen cuts to branches and services and a fall in remuneration for sub-postmasters. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw told us eloquently—and scandalously—of the 1,016 temporary closed post offices throughout the UK, which is a terrible state of affairs for the communities affected. Most notably, we have seen a significant reduction in the Crown post office branches: the high street branches that provide the widest range of services, that are easily accessible for local communities and are inclusive of people with disabilities.

Over the past five years the Post Office has announced the closure of 150 Crown post offices, which is 40% of its 2013 Crown post office network. Most have been transferred to retailers such as WHSmith to install a counter for post office services in other premises. Although that retains a level of provision in the area, it is often done in the face of substantial local opposition and with a significant reduction in services, accessibility and well-paid jobs. The removal of high street branches away from view is contrary to economic sense. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was unable to attend today, but she has made important points about her local post office, which was in a prime location in York, but is now being moved into a WHSmith in a more remote area of the town, where shops are closing and where the level of footfall is not as high as it was before. In some cases, post offices have been relocated to retail units close to existing ones. I can speak for a sub-postmaster in my constituency, where another outlet was allowed to open a post office about a mile away from his business, and he is really seeing the hardship of that and wondering whether he will be able to continue.

Furthermore, transferring post offices to retailers such as WHSmith could be perceived as risky in a climate that has seen our struggling high street stores closing at alarming rates. At an all-party group on post offices meeting in October last year, I was surprised when Post Office executives gave me and other Members no reassurances of any contingency planning in the event of difficulties facing WHSmith. I urge the Minister to provide us with an insight into what assessment she has made of the long-term sustainability of that partnership as a matter of urgency?

As the modernisation programme continues, we are also seeing a gradual retreat of Post Office financial services. Instead of growing services, only last month it announced it will close the Post Office Money current account, which serves 21,000 customers. And the end is in sight for the Post Office card account, which will hit many people hard if they are in vulnerable circumstances and do not have the income to open a bank account in a high street bank.

Rural communities in particular rely on the post office to access financial services. Removing those services leaves consumers vulnerable to even further financial exclusion. To have a sustainable future, we have to be bold and brave about what our post office can offer. That is why I am delighted that the Labour party has announced we will set up a post bank to deliver banking services through post office branches, including relationship banking with small businesses. By utilising the extensive network of post office branches, the post bank would have by far the largest branch network of all UK banks. The report that has looked into the matter estimates that more than 3,600 post office branches are suitable to provide banking services, or would be with a small amount of capital investment. With the branches spread evenly across the country, every community would have easy access to face-to-face banking in their local branch of the post bank.

We have to recognise that we must invest and encourage our trusted institutions and not let them down. Does the Minister agree that a post bank could form a creative and bold answer to the long-term sustainability of the post office network and to the receding presence of banks on our high streets?

Beyond the closures and the fall in services, we also see the Post Office squeezing hard-working sub-postmasters' remuneration. Sub-postmasters play a significant role in the running of the post office network. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) told us about his postmaster who felt conned into setting up the business and could now face financial ruin and also hardship to the community that he set up to serve. It simply does not make sense. Some 98% of the post office network is run by sub-postmasters—mostly individual, independent business people—but remuneration for sub-postmasters has fallen in recent years.

In its 2017-18 annual report, the Post Office reported that the amount paid to sub-postmasters had fallen by £17 million since 2016-17, a reduction of 4.4%. The fall in remuneration is pushing them out of business, and many have to endure months of below minimum wage pay, all under the party that claims it is the party of business. What assessment has the Minister made of the remuneration for sub-postmasters? Can she share any insights with Members of the House? Does she not agree that the Government should carry out an urgent

review to prevent more closures and more hardship, and the terrible tragedies of people who have set up a business in all good faith then facing financial ruin?

In this debate, there is an elephant in the room. I thank the Minister for meeting me to discuss the matter privately, where I was able to raise my concerns. As we know, a group of sub-postmasters has launched a legal case against the Post Office on an issue surrounding its IT system. I do not want to go into details as the case is ongoing and will probably last until 2020. As I highlighted earlier, there is a relationship of trust between the public and the Post Office. It appears that some light has been shed into some of the practices and behaviour that appear to run deep into the psyche of the organisation. I hope the Minister will consider that a broader review into the management and governance structure of the Post Office, and whether the Government have fully exercised their oversight functions, or whether those powers need to be significantly strengthened, might be required to assure the public and to commit to the long-term sustainability of the network.

I have outlined only some of the matters that bring into question the long-term sustainability of the post office network. Many Members have made their views known in this and previous debates about how those matters exercise the communities that they represent. To secure a hopeful future for it, we must address the issues. We have to address the closures by ending them and the declining financial services by being bold and creative. We have to address the retention of a network of experienced staff by ensuring that they are properly remunerated and looked after. Finally, we have to address the issues raised in the justices' findings by reviewing the overall governance of the Post Office.

3.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and the hon. Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), on securing today's important debate on the sustainability of the post office network.

As I have said many times before, I am always happy to challenge the Post Office on specific concerns that MPs have at constituency level. I am therefore grateful to hon. Members for their contributions. It is encouraging to see that all sides of the House share common cause in ensuring that a vital national asset continues to serve our constituencies for many years to come. It is because of the key role that post offices play in service to their communities that our 2017 manifesto committed to safeguarding the network.

Brendan O'Hara: Will the Minister join the consensus across the House to support the retention of the post office network in public hands?

Kelly Tolhurst: If the hon. Gentleman would allow me the courtesy of getting to the content of my speech, that would be really useful. I am still at the start. We made a commitment in our 2017 manifesto and are committed to safeguarding the network. The Post Office is publicly owned and it is a commercial business operating

in competitive markets. The Government set the strategic direction for the Post Office to maintain a national network, accessible to all, and to do so in a more sustainable way for the taxpayer. We allow the company the commercial freedom to deliver that strategy as an independent business.

I must point out some of the language and words used in the debate, such as "managed decline" and "undermining the network", and the idea that it is ideological of the Tories to run down post office branches. As the Minister responsible for post offices, I find that incorrect and inaccurate. I do not regard Government investment of £2 billion over eight years as a so-called managed decline or undermining of the network, and I do not regard the establishment of 450 new locations since 2017 as managed decline or an undermining of the network. As hon. Members have outlined, at the end of March there were 11,547 branches. That number is as stable as it has been in many decades, so I refute those claims.

Patricia Gibson: I hear the Minister's objection to the term managed decline, and that is fine. We are allowed to disagree with each other in this Chamber; we have that privilege. However, there is no plan in place in the—I think not unlikely—event that WHSmith completely collapses. It has declined over 14 years. Would she care to take that up?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for her comment, but I highlight that WHSmith has been successfully running post office franchises since 2006. We are now in 2019, and the reality is that, in any franchising service and any business, work is always going on behind the scenes in regard to the management of the network. There is a massive network of 11,500 outlets throughout the country. As the Minister responsible, I will, quite rightly, challenge the Post Office on any issues I am told about. I am committed to maintaining that network.

I have highlighted that so early in my speech because ever since I have had this role I have been clear at the Dispatch Box and in any debate that I will talk to any MP about issues they have in their constituency about post office branches. I will also talk to anyone about the Post Office and take those issues forward to challenge it. I will also defend the Post Office when required.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Kelly Tolhurst: I give way to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry).

Drew Hendry: The Minister is making a powerful statement of commitment, but she has heard from around the Chamber the pressures faced by local post office sub-postmasters living on subsistence terms and struggling to maintain a living. Will she bring that enthusiasm, energy and commitment to sorting out their livelihoods and securing their post offices?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that, because that is exactly what I hope to do.

Gill Furniss: I want to continue on the point about contingency planning. At an APPG meeting some months ago, when we questioned the management who had

[Gill Furniss]

turned up to talk to us about various things, it was clear that they had no contingency plan whatsoever should WHSmith fail. It is okay to say they have been doing it since 2006, but so have NatWest, HSBC and TSB, and now we see them disappearing from the high street. It is crucial that the Minister takes that seriously. If she did not know that the Post Office had no contingency plans in place, its keeping her in the dark is a serious omission on its part.

More generally, at that APPG meeting the management told us that the consultation was not worth the paper it was written on and that they would not take notice of any views from individuals or communities. Indeed, the only reason they were asking was to see whether there were any comments on disabled access. I asked them why that was the case, because they have a duty of care to look at disabled access and to listen to communities.

Kelly Tolhurst: I understand where the hon. Lady is coming from, but the reality is that 98% of the post office network is franchised. That is the fundamental business model within the Post Office and its distribution of services. The hon. Lady makes a presumption that WHSmith will fail, and its franchises will therefore be under threat. That does not take into account the potential future development of the Post Office and how we are challenging it. However, as I have outlined today, and in any conversation I have had with any colleague, when hon. Members highlight something to me, I will, as the responsible Minister, always raise that with the Post Office.

In my day-to-day role, I will always challenge the decisions and workings of the Post Office. However, while we are the Post Office's shareholder, it is commercially run, so it is within its rights to manage operational delivery, but it is for me to challenge, oversee and raise questions where I believe work is needed to resolve matters.

Hugh Gaffney: I will keep it short and sweet: will the Minister ask WHSmith why it will not talk to the CWU, and ask it to talk to the CWU to represent members properly?

Kelly Tolhurst: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about the CWU and perhaps the conversations with WHSmith, but the union's relationship with an independent retailer such as WHSmith is a matter for it. It is not for me to direct an independent business. I know the hon. Gentleman and his passion for this subject well, so I am sure he will do all that he can, in his role and with his experience, to ensure that communication takes place.

Gavin Newlands: I had the time to advertise my surgery on Saturday in my speech, and I look forward to attending the Minister's Tea Room surgery, where we can discuss some aspects of my speech in more detail. For the public record, will she give me and the people in Bridge of Weir and elsewhere in my constituency a commitment at least to look at the community designation of post offices? I am asking her to commit not to changing that but to looking at where there may be shortfalls.

Kelly Tolhurst: I am always happy to look at the details and where we can improve services if that is possible. I must point out that the post office network is long established and well loved. We love the people who work in our post office network: the sub-postmasters and the workers—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members might heckle, but we do. The Government definitely do, and rightly so.

I have outlined this afternoon my personal commitment to the post office network, as we did in our manifesto, to see where we can improve it and where we can all work together to secure the future sustainability of a strong network throughout the country. There are challenges ahead, just as there are within retail. They are not insurmountable, but the challenge for us is to work with all of our stakeholders to tackle those and secure the network for the future.

The facts clearly show that the Post Office has made substantial progress over the past decade. The inhibiting cultural legacy of being a lesser partner to Royal Mail, with high public sector costs, has almost disappeared. As a business, Post Office Ltd is increasingly profitable and takes action to consolidate and defend its position in the market. Between 2010 and 2018, we backed the Post Office with nearly £2 billion to maintain and invest in a national network that had 11,547 post offices at the end of March. That extensive network gives the Post Office a unique reach among service providers. The Post Office currently meets and exceeds all the Government's accessibility targets at a national level.

Patricia Gibson: I appreciate the amount of investment that the Minister is talking about; it is clearly a lot of money, although people might want a debate about whether it is enough. In spite of that investment, does the Minister understand the concerns raised today? In Scotland 22% of the entire post office network has closed over the past 15 years. Surely she, like me, laments that figure because of the scale of loss it represents.

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady is right to raise those concerns. She is also right that we are concerned about any particular closures that may happen, as is Post Office Ltd. That is why Post Office Ltd works hard—it always works hard—where there are unforeseen closures to make sure that those branches reopen. Since I have been in post there have been a number of examples where I and local MPs have worked with the post office network and local communities to make sure that new facilities are opened.

Where there have been closures, I would always encourage people to raise them with Ministers and to work with Post Office Ltd to make sure that we can sustain the network. The hon. Lady is right to have concerns, but she is wrong to say that the intention is not to renew those branches and not make sure that the network is stable in Scotland. There is a commitment and a desire to achieve that.

Government investment has also enabled the modernisation of over 7,500 branches, added more than 200,000 opening hours per week and established the Post Office as the largest network trading on Sundays. In terms of services provided, the Post Office's agreement with the high street banks enables personal and business banking in all branches, ensuring that every community has appropriate access to cash and supporting consumers,

businesses and local economies in the face of bank branch closures, particularly in rural and urban deprived areas. I encourage the House to look closely and objectively at these facts; they show unequivocally that the network is at its most stable and is much more sustainable today than in 2010.

We are not complacent. Post Office Ltd has to keep exploring new business opportunities to ensure a thriving national network for the benefit of communities, businesses and postmasters up and down the country. One of the most important and visible aspects of the Post Office strategy is its franchising programme. I accept that some communities have a strong emotional attachment to Crown post offices and naturally there will be concerns when proposals come forward to franchise their local branches, but our high streets are facing unprecedented challenges and the Post Office is not immune to them. Just like any other high street business, it needs to respond to these pressures and adapt to changing customer needs.

Franchising has reduced the taxpayer funding that the Post Office requires from Government, while maintaining—and, in some instances, improving—customer service levels. In fact, the report by Citizens Advice in 2017 indicated that franchised branches are performing in line with or better than traditional branches. I reassure hon. Members that, as part of its ongoing monitoring role, Citizens Advice will continue to track the impact of post office changes on consumers and on customer satisfaction in respect of post offices. Citizens Advice also has a formal advisory role in reviewing changes to Crown post offices across Great Britain that are relocated and franchised.

Serving rural communities is at the very heart of the Post Office's social purpose. There are over 6,100 post offices in rural areas and virtually everyone living in such areas is within 3 miles of one of those branches. Last year, a study by Citizens Advice found that seven out of 10 rural consumers buy essential items at post offices and almost 3 million rural shoppers—that is, 31% of rural residents—visit a post office on a weekly basis, compared to 21% of people living in urban areas. The importance of post offices to rural areas is illustrated by the fact that almost half have community status. They are the last shops in the village, as hon. Members have outlined. Rural post office branches, whether main, local or traditional, can offer the same products and services as urban ones of the same category.

The Post Office recognises the unique challenge of running a community branch and supports those postmasters differently from those in the rest of the network. They receive fixed remuneration, as well as variable remuneration, to reflect their special situation. In addition, the Post Office delivered almost £10 million of investment via the Community Fund between 2014 and 2018. That enabled community branches to invest in their associated retail business. The Post Office has now launched a smaller community branch development scheme that will benefit an anticipated 700 branches. Let me be clear: this Government and the Post Office will continue to support rural post offices.

Some hon. Members raised concerns about the rates of remuneration paid to postmasters, especially for banking services; I, too, have been and continue to be concerned about that issue. While the contractual relationship between Post Office Ltd and postmasters is an operational responsibility for the company, I care

deeply about the issue and I am determined to make sure that running a post office remains an attractive business proposition.

We offer post offices several ways of doing that, including the development of services for the future. My challenge to people thinking of taking on a franchise or a post office is to make sure that they deliver the services demanded by consumers and therefore enable post offices to continue to be relevant in today's market, given the way consumers use services now compared to the past.

I have committed to meeting interested parties, including the Post Office Ltd and the National Federation of SubPostmasters, more regularly so we can ensure that particular issues, case studies and direct concerns are discussed and challenged on a more frequent basis, and we can all work together. Everybody in this room and all our stakeholders want to see the Post Office thrive and develop in the future. Some Members may regard me as having a different ideological view: there may be different ways of getting there, but the outcomes should remain the same.

Gill Furniss: The Minister talks about her passion for post offices and how everyone will work together. Would it not make more sense to have a review of how things are working at the moment? As I and others have mentioned, having a friendly little chat probably will not work. We urgently need a proper review of the governance and management and of the remuneration of sub-postmasters.

Kelly Tolhurst: I appreciate that the hon. Lady would like me to announce that we will hold a review, but fundamentally, as I have outlined, the Post Office is a commercial entity operating in a competitive market. It is owned by the taxpayer, and it is right that we are challenged and that it is run efficiently.

I point out that the Post Office has been making a surplus. We now have a sustainable network and a surplus. We have moved on from a time when there were more than 7,000 post office closures and the Post Office was over £1 billion in debt. We are not in that place today. That has been achieved by maintaining the network and investing correctly. However, I have tried to show that I understand hon. Members' concerns about the viability of postmasters and their pay. I hope I have already outlined and expressed my determination to get to the bottom of some of these challenges and to ensure that they are addressed by the Post Office.

Drew Hendry: The Minister is being generous in taking interventions, and I appreciate that. She speaks passionately about her commitment to investigating this, and has commented that she believes the network is sustainable and well invested in at the moment. Will she take that a step further by coming to speak to some of the people running local post offices, particularly in the highlands and islands? They might not recognise the fact that they are within three miles of communities or that they have that kind of investment, because that is not their lived experience. Will she take up that invitation?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that invitation. I do speak to postmasters and, if time allows, I will be happy to go and visit post offices in any part of

[Kelly Tolhurst]

the country, if possible. However, we really need to look at the network and understand the operation. Post Office Ltd operates more than 11,547 stores—a sustainable network. In many of those circumstances, there will be particular differences. Of those stores, 98% are franchises, which in effect are businesses in themselves. It is acceptable to expect that there will be some churn and there will be particular issues that need to be dealt with.

Gill Furniss *indicated dissent.*

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady shakes her head, but that is the reality. I apologise to her, because she is always very courteous to me in the many debates we have. At some stage or another there will be issues with a number within the network, and it is right that those are raised and that we deal with them. This is not something I like to accept, but sometimes there will be cases that cause problems, and the right course of action is to have debates such as this, to challenge me or whichever Minister is responsible and to ensure that we work to ensure that those particular branch or constituency issues are dealt with.

Part of the changes to the network involved moving from fixed and variable remuneration to a fully variable basis, based on transaction fees. That means that it is now important that a post office service is combined with a good retail offer to be successful. At the same time, fixed remuneration remains in those rural and remote locations where that approach is just not viable.

Post Office Ltd is not complacent and periodically reviews the rate of return on all services for postmasters to reflect the time and effort involved. For example, last year the Post Office increased remuneration on banking deposits twice to reflect the increased demand for services. I thank hon. Members for their positive comments about the increase announced last week to remuneration for postmasters for banking transactions; as hon. Members have outlined, that has doubled or in some cases tripled the fee payable to postmasters. Where possible, Post Office Ltd will continue to use the renewals of commercial contracts as opportunities to negotiate improved rates that can be shared with the postmaster.

I will answer a direct question put to me about why the Post Office is bringing forward the increase in charges only in October and why it is not happening before that time. The Post Office has taken the decision to implement the new banking framework payments to postmasters one quarter before the new negotiated banking framework comes into play. I understand that postmasters may be concerned, but the Post Office has acted to bring that in early and to enable the uplift to postmasters as soon as practically possible.

I want to pick up on one point raised by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and give him some more information on cashpoints. He raised a concern about a post office having to pay the Post Office for that machine. Under its agreement with the Bank of Ireland, the Post Office pays post offices for the provision of the machines; they are remunerated for that. I would not be able to comment on any private agreement between an individual post office and another provider for the cashpoints. I would very much welcome further information after the debate, and I am happy to look into the issue for him.

Mr Sweeney: The additional concern is that the ATM footprint is subject to business rates, which is obviously a cost borne by the franchise holder. That is money over and above that received from Post Office Ltd, and it therefore represents a financial detriment to the franchise holder. The Minister needs to come up with a mechanism to offset that cost to the business, because otherwise it is unsustainable.

Kelly Tolhurst: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have been working to make business rates more equitable for small businesses, and we are looking at the impact of that. Post offices will have benefited from that work. He mentions costs that he has been made aware of; if he lets me know that particular constituency issue, I am more than happy to take that forward. As I have outlined, under the Bank of Ireland agreement with the Post Office, postmasters are remunerated for, rather than being expected to pay for the privilege of, delivering that service for our communities.

On the question of cashpoints, as we are faced with bank closures, which is a problem that we all very much agree on—they have deserted our high streets—it is for the post offices to pick up the slack in some cases. That is why this Government, with the Post Office, have been negotiating strongly on the new banking framework—to get a better deal for the postmasters who are delivering services that we all rely on in our high streets and communities.

The question of accessibility in the franchise branches has been raised. Franchising means that a post office presence can be maintained in town and city centres in a way that not only makes financial sense, but ensures that services are more accessible to customers, for example through the provision of extended hours and Sunday opening. Post Office Ltd is wholeheartedly committed to ensuring that the needs of the community and its customers are met in any relocation. That is why the Post Office consultation encourages the community to share its views on all matters, including issues related to accessibility under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Post Office Ltd and its franchise partners have stringent rules regarding access to post office branches, which meet all relevant legal requirements, to ensure that all customers, including those with disability or mobility issues, can access their branches. The Post Office also runs local consultations in order to engage local communities, so that they help to shape its plans. The Post Office does not seek a mandate for the franchising, but consults on practical aspects of a proposed relocation, such as service provision and accessibility.

Hugh Gaffney: The Minister mentions communication. Has she met the Communication Workers Union about post office closures? Will she arrange that?

Kelly Tolhurst: If I might correct the hon. Gentleman, they are not closures; they are franchises. I am concerned about the language used when we talk about the post office network. We are talking about a change in operation, not closures or a loss of service. I will happily meet the CWU on any issues it wants to raise. However, I have to be clear that these are not closures; they are franchises. I think that that sends a really strong message, because communities will think that they are losing all their post office services, when that is factually not the case.

I am aware that hon. Members have expressed concerns about this process. I have met many hon. Members to discuss issues that they have had with franchising in their constituency, and have raised those directly with Post Office Ltd. Citizens Advice reports that Post Office consultation is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed and reassurances provided in most cases. That demonstrates that the Post Office is listening to communities. Ultimately, decisions on franchising are commercial ones for the Post Office to take—within the parameters set by the Government to ensure that we protect our valued network.

On the partnership between WHSmith and Post Office Ltd, WHSmith sees post offices as a central hub in the community and takes the social responsibilities that come with that very seriously. As I have outlined, WHSmith has successfully operated post offices within its stores since 2006, and following the recent agreement, the number of post offices run in WHSmith stores will be greater than 200. This will support the long-term sustainability of post office branches and bring longer opening hours, so that customers are offered seven days of trading a week in convenient locations. Throughout this period, WH Smith has shown that it can successfully run post office branches across the country by delivering excellent standards of customer service, with trained staff promoting products and services in a modern retail environment.

Hon. Members have levied accusations about the fitness of WHSmith and its operation, but it is still very much a recognised brand on the high street, as is the Post Office. We need to accept that some consumers and customers are still very much lovers of the WHSmith brand. I have visited WHSmith branches in which there have been franchises, and the feedback from the community has been very good. I have seen at first hand how it can work. However, each store operates independently. Again, if there are issues with branches in any Member's constituency, we will always raise those directly with the Post Office.

The Post Office card account is a commercial matter for the Department for Work and Pensions and Post Office Ltd. However, it is no secret that the contract for the Post Office card account comes to an end on 30 November 2021. For claimants who are unable to open a mainstream account ahead of that date, DWP will implement an alternative payment service that allows users to obtain cash payments, wherever their location, before the end of the contract.

It is worth pointing out that that 99% of a bank's personal customers are able to withdraw cash, deposit cash and cheques and make balance enquiries at a post office counter. Post offices will therefore remain central to delivering cash to customers, including the elderly or the most vulnerable, regardless of the banking product that they chose or move to.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) rightly said that it would not be appropriate for us to talk about the legal proceedings at this time. However, I assure her that as the Minister responsible, I will endeavour to take any action required. I am absolutely committed to doing whatever is in my power to make sure that the Post Office retains its standing, and that the relationships it maintains are the best that they can possibly be.

Hugh Gaffney: The Minister says that standards will be maintained. Franchises do not maintain the same standard of services as Crown post offices. That is the point I am trying to make.

Kelly Tolhurst: I respect the hon. Gentleman's position, but I disagree that moving to a franchise equals a loss of services and standards. I do not believe that, and I have not seen that, so I respectfully disagree. However, I absolutely take his point and understand his concerns.

Decisions on bank branch closures are a commercial matter for banks and are taken by the management team of each bank, without intervention from the Government. So that hon. Members can see exactly how well I understand the problem, I highlight that I represent Rochester and Strood, and Rochester no longer has a bank in what was the city. However, the Government recognise that branch closures can be disappointing for customers and believe that the impact on communities must be understood, considered and mitigated where possible. That is why we support the Post Office's banking framework agreement, which enables 99% of the UK's personal banking customers and 95% of the UK's small and medium-sized enterprise banking customers to carry out day-to-day banking in the post office network.

I reassure the House that all post offices across the network are of the utmost importance to the Government. We recognise their value and importance to communities, residents, business and tourism in rural and urban parts of the UK. We also recognise and respect our sub-postmasters and the people who work within franchises, who work so hard, as was outlined throughout the debate; some postmasters will go the extra mile. We respect them, and we are determined to work with our partners to make sure that we maintain the Post Office as a viable business proposition for any postmaster to continue with. We will continue to honour our manifesto commitments, so that post offices thrive and remain at the heart of our rural and urban communities.

I again thank hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I understand their frustrations, and I take their issues on board. In closing, I remind colleagues that, as I have said several times, I am always willing to talk to any MP regarding any constituency branch issue.

3.57 pm

Marion Fellows: It is a pleasure to see you in the Chamber and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Unfortunately, you missed the beginning of the debate, and I have to say that the Minister's summing-up did not bear a lot of resemblance to what was actually said throughout. However, I am delighted that she agrees with us that the post office network is a vital national asset. It was a commitment in the Tory manifesto of 2017 to safeguard the network, but the tales that we heard from across the Chamber today are strong evidence that the network is not being safeguarded.

However, I am also very pleased that the Minister has reiterated that managed decline is not her objective. It is no one's objective, but there is real concern and fear in our communities. Almost weekly now, we as Members of the House of Commons receive representations from postmasters about their absolute desire to work harder and to work well within their communities, but about how they cannot afford to do that at present. They are

[*Marion Fellows*]

making less money per hour than the national minimum wage. Some are handling huge sums of cash, and they cannot make a living—that must not be allowed.

I do not think it is right that the Minister should hide behind the commercial independence of Post Office Ltd. It is really important to everyone in this Chamber and in our communities that the post office network be sustainable and move forward. During my speech, I asked 15 questions of the Minister. I asked for reviews; I asked for various things. I have not heard a single answer to any of the questions that I asked, but for the sake of brevity, I shall pick up now on only two of my questions.

As the Minister mentioned, Citizens Advice will continue to track services provided by the post office network, but what will she actually do when it reports back and says that things are not working? I have not heard an answer to that.

On outreach post offices in rural communities, a matter raised by various Members, I ask the Minister this: what happens after 2021, when the payments to those post offices cease?

I am sorry: I cannot count, because I have one more issue to raise. Post offices were to be the front office of Government. I ask the Minister to speak about that to Ministers in other Departments, such as the Home Office. The contract for biometric services has not been renewed by the Home Office, and that is putting more post offices at risk.

Hon. Members from across the Chamber intervened on the Minister. I chose not to do so, but I really hope that she will take on board my questions and provide answers that I can share with the Members who were here today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the sustainability of the Post Office network.

4.1 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 8 April 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Companies House Public Targets

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State of Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lord Henley) has made the following statement:

I have set Companies House the following targets for the year 2019-20:

Public Targets

Ensure that our digital services are available 99.9% of the time.

Ensure that 97% of companies have an up-to-date confirmation statement.

Achieve a customer satisfaction rate of 83%.

Provide a digital service to enable someone at risk to apply for their personal data to be protected.

Deliver digital services that transform the end to end accounts filing journey.

Increase job applications from underrepresented groups by 10%.

Ensure that our people understand, and are engaged with, our purpose and vision, achieving a score in this area in the civil service people survey in the upper quartile.

Reduce the cost of our business activities by 3.5%.

[HCWS1495]

DEFENCE

Counter-Daesh Operations

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The House may welcome an update on the military campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria. Forces in Iraq and Syria now say that, with the support of the global Coalition, they have liberated all the towns and cities that were once occupied by Daesh. This is a huge achievement, and one in which UK forces should take great pride for the part they played in this success. The Global Coalition assesses there are currently not enough Daesh fighters remaining in Iraq and Syria to make any further significant territorial gains. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this is not the defeat of Daesh as an organisation. Daesh has dispersed into a cellular structure in order to maintain insurgency activity, planting improvised explosive devices, conducting extortion, kidnapping and mounting terrorist attacks. The UK, as a partner in the Coalition, is committed to defeating this ongoing threat, in order to guarantee the lasting defeat of Daesh's ambitions, to build on the stability of the region and protect our interests and our national security.

The UK has contributed sophisticated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to find, identify and enable the Coalition to degrade Daesh's military capabilities, which is as crucial to the air campaign now as it was at Daesh's territorial height. ISR alone does not make a successful campaign, however; since the beginning of operations over Iraq and Syria, the UK's Tornado, Typhoon and Reaper aircraft have released over 4,300 weapons against Daesh targets to reduce their military capabilities.

In 2015, the then Secretary of State for Defence, Sir Michael Fallon, committed to providing Parliament with UK airstrike numbers from the Coalition's datasets to allow us to compare our contribution with other Coalition partners. This was a move away from using a UK dataset and methodology to calculate our airstrike contribution to the Counter-Daesh fight. Following the House of Commons Defence Committee's request to provide a biannual breakdown of our air contribution to the Counter-Daesh campaign in Iraq and Syria, I have reviewed the method by which our contribution to the Coalition's air campaign are calculated and from this decided to discontinue reporting on airstrikes, which can be interpreted differently each time they are viewed, to focus on reporting the number of actual weapon release events.

Under doctrine, an airstrike is one or more weapon releases against the same target by one or more aircraft. With this definition, two aircraft dropping weapons on the same target could be seen by one person as one airstrike, and as two airstrikes by another. We do not consider this a reliable method of reporting our contribution. A weapon release event is the employment of a single weapon system, by a single airframe, at one time, against a single target. As such, a weapon release event will always be calculated and reported in the same way and cannot be misinterpreted.

[HCWS1498]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Serious Youth Violence

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The Government are deeply concerned about the recent rise in serious violence, particularly knife crime, which is robbing too many children and young people of their futures. This is a challenge that affects all of society, and agencies must come together in a co-ordinated, wide-reaching and long-term effort.

In order to ensure the strongest possible response, the Prime Minister hosted a serious youth violence summit at 10 Downing Street, with the support of the Home Secretary, from 1 to 4 April. The central aim of the summit was to ensure a shared understanding and commitment to a multiagency, "public health" approach to tackling knife crime and serious violence more generally.

This approach involves partners across different sectors—such as education, health, social services, offender management services, housing, youth and victim services, working closely with community and faith leaders, and the voluntary and charitable sectors—taking joint action

to address the underlying risk factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will become a victim or a perpetrator of violence.

The Prime Minister opened the summit by chairing a roundtable meeting with a range of experts, representatives and practitioners from key sectors, community leaders, young people, and cross-party politicians. Alongside the Prime Minister, both I and other senior Ministers discussed with these experts what more can be done to tackle recent rises in serious violence. This was followed by a series of themed sessions chaired by Secretaries of State and Ministers during the week, aimed at harnessing expert knowledge and creating the conditions to boost joint working across sectors and organisations. I will place a full list of the attendees—of whom there were well over 100 over the course of the week—in the Libraries of both Houses.

The full programme of thematic sessions, which took place over the course of the summit, included:

Best practice in law enforcement, chaired by the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service;

The role of education, chaired by the Secretary of State for Education;

Investing in communities, chaired by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government;

Positive activities for young people, chaired by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport;

Creating opportunities for young people, chaired by the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability;

The role of the health sector, chaired by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care;

Effectiveness of the criminal justice system, chaired by the Secretary of State for Justice.

The following coincided with this summit:

I announced that Impetus, in partnership with the Early Intervention Foundation and Social Investment Business, will run the new youth endowment fund, which will support interventions with children and young people at risk of involvement in crime and violence, based on £200 million of new Government funding.

The Government announced £100 million additional funding in 2019-20 to tackle serious violence, including £80 million of new funding from the Treasury. This will allow police to swiftly crackdown on knife crime on the areas of the country most affected by knife crime and will also allow for investment in violence reduction units.

That I will be making it simpler for the police in the seven forces particularly affected by violent crime, to use section 60 (area-wide) stop and search powers where they reasonably believe that an incident involving serious violence may occur. This pilot will be for up to a year, with a review after six months—after which we will make decisions on next steps. The College of Policing will also work alongside forces to create new guidelines on how best the police can engage with communities on the use of stop and search.

I launched a public consultation on a new legal duty to ensure that public bodies work together to protect young people at risk of becoming involved in knife crime. This would underpin the multiagency approach already being driven by the serious violence strategy, which stresses the importance of early intervention to tackle the root causes of violent crime. Similar approaches have been used in Scotland and Wales, and are designed to ensure that every part of the system is supporting young people with targeted interventions before they commit violence or are groomed by gangs.

These announcements build on the significant progress we have made in delivering the commitments set out in the serious violence strategy published in April 2018.

These include: the early intervention youth fund of £22 million, through which the Home Office is already supporting 29 projects in England and Wales; the new national county lines co-ordination centre; an antknife crime community fund which provided £1.5 million in 2018-19 to support 68 local projects to tackle knife crime; and a national knife crime media campaign—#knifefree—to raise young people's awareness of the consequences of knife crime; and the establishment of the serious violence taskforce, which I chair and which is attended by Members of Parliament, Ministers, senior police officers, representatives of agencies in the public and voluntary sectors and others, to drive action across a number of fronts.

The summit has reinforced my view, shared across Government, that there is not one single solution to rising levels of serious violence, and that co-ordinated action is needed across a number of fronts. Attendees agreed on the need to understand the causes and consequences of serious violence, focused on prevention and early intervention, and informed by evidence and rigorous evaluation of interventions. To do this, we must bring together information, data and intelligence and encourage organisations and individuals to work in concert rather than in isolation, focusing on those identified as being most vulnerable to involvement in serious violent crime. Attendees identified many examples of good practice taking place in local areas and communities, and there was consensus on the importance of a shared approach to preventing and tackling serious violence.

In particular, the summit has already enabled the following outcomes:

The creation of a new ministerial taskforce, chaired by the Prime Minister, to drive cross-Government action. This will be supported by a new, dedicated, serious violence team in the Cabinet Office to support cross-departmental co-ordination.

There is commitment to better data collection and sharing of appropriate data between the healthcare sector and other key organisations in order to protect children, and to make it easier for health professionals to play an enhanced role in reducing violence. This will be accompanied by the rollout of mental health support teams based in and around schools and education settings, to help vulnerable children within their community, some of which will be in areas most affected by knife crime. The teams will be available to support children directly or indirectly affected by knife crime as part of the school or college response.

There is an expansion of the partnership with the Premier League to increase one of its flagship community programmes, Premier League Kicks, which uses football to inspire young people to develop their potential and build stronger, safer communities. Sport England, which invests more than £10 million in projects that use sport to support crime reduction, has also pledged to increase investment in sport and physical activity for children in hot spot areas.

There is an extension of the support provided by the National Homicide Service to witnesses, as part of a raft of new measures, which will focus on supporting victims and witnesses of violent crime and directing youth offenders away from further violence. These include: extending emotional, practical, trauma and counselling support beyond victims to now include those who witness murder or manslaughter in London; specialist training for staff at youth offender institutions to spot signs of past abuse, exploitation or serious violence experienced by the youths in custody and help direct them to support services; and reviewing the victims' code, which sets out what services victims are entitled to receive, to make it clearer what support witnesses of serious violent crime can access.

These deliverables represent the first step of an increased programme of work across Government—and beyond—to tackle serious youth violence. Once the ministerial taskforce has been established, it will agree a plan of action and then oversee its implementation going forward. We will continue to keep Parliament updated. The summit demonstrates the commitment from the Prime Minister, myself and Ministers across Government, setting a clear direction and galvanising action to tackle serious violence. Working together, this new approach will ensure we meet the scourge of youth violence head on, so that more families are spared the unimaginable suffering that has already been endured by so many.

[HCWS1497]

Windrush Compensation Scheme

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Yesterday the Home Secretary announced the launch of the Windrush Compensation Scheme. The Government deeply regret what has happened to some members of the Windrush generation and the launch of the compensation scheme marks a key milestone in righting the wrongs they have experienced.

Detailed information about the compensation scheme, including the rules that govern the scheme, with the forms and guidance that people need to make a claim, are available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/windrush-compensation-scheme>. Our helpline is also open now on: 0800 678 1925 for those wishing to receive printed copies of the claim form or for any other queries, this is free if calling from within the UK. Those calling from outside the UK will be called back.

I would like to clarify, further to questions raised with the Home Secretary on the Floor of the House, three issues in relation to eligibility to apply for compensation. The first is in relation to those who are not resident in the UK. A Commonwealth citizen outside the UK, who was settled in the UK before 1 January 1973, who has settled status, right of abode or is now a British citizen, or whose settled status has lapsed due to being absent from the UK for a period of two or more years is eligible to apply for compensation.

Secondly, the definition of a close family member for the purpose of the compensation scheme is a spouse or civil partner living with the claimant, cohabitee for continuous period of two years or more, a parent, a child or a sibling. Close family members are entitled to

claim regardless of whether a primary claimant chooses to make an application and whether said claimant is deceased.

Thirdly, the definition of serious criminality for the purposes of the compensation scheme is defined as a conviction that received a sentence of imprisonment of four years or more, and that the offending was of such a nature that makes it inappropriate to make an award in whole or part. This provision does not apply to a conviction and sentence outside of the UK for conduct which on the date of the conviction was not an offence in the UK.

The Home Office is committed to raising awareness of the scheme, and to encouraging eligible people of all nationalities to submit a claim. Eligibility for compensation goes beyond members of the Caribbean Commonwealth, and we are putting in place a programme of events with key stakeholders, faith and community organisations to promote both the scheme and the wider work of the Commonwealth citizens taskforce. The first of such events is scheduled for Lambeth town hall on Friday 5 April and full details are available via the gov.uk page.

Regrettably, in promoting the scheme via email to interested parties, an administrative error was made which has meant data protection requirements have not been met, for which the Home Office apologises unreservedly.

This occurred in emails sent to some of the individuals and organisations who had registered an interest in being kept informed about the launch of the compensation scheme, which included other recipients' email addresses. Five batches of emails, each with 100 recipients, were affected. No other personal data was included.

A recall was commenced as soon as the problem had been identified. The departmental data protection officer has been informed and an internal review will be conducted to ensure this cannot happen again. The Department has voluntarily notified the Information Commissioner's Office of the incident.

I am firmly committed to doing right by the Windrush generation. The compensation scheme is an important step towards that and I will ensure that action is taken to ensure the highest standards are met not only in the processing of cases, but also in continued efforts to publicise the scheme and ensure those entitled to redress receive it.

[HCWS1496]

Written Statements

Tuesday 9 April 2019

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Leaving the EU: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): In the event of the UK leaving the European Union without a deal, I have agreed to extend a financial assurance to cover the work of any UK organisations delivering funding agreed by direct bid to the European neighbourhood instrument, instrument for pre-accession and the common foreign and security policy instrument, in the regrettable event that funding is cut by the EU. My Department for International Development (DFID) colleague has made a separate announcement regarding heading IV instruments under her remit.

This financial assurance will prevent both a loss of funding to UK recipients of grants secured through direct bidding to the Commission and disruption to programmes led by these recipients in areas such as north Africa, western Balkans, Turkey, Ukraine and the Caucasus, where UK expertise is delivering important support to stability and reform. We want to ensure that ongoing work is not impacted on unfairly after we leave the European Union.

The exact size of the contingency liability is still unknown, as there is a lag in the awarding and publication of contracts by the EU. The size of the liability is therefore subject to change, though our current estimate is approximately £50 million.

[HCWS1499]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation: Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): In accordance with section 36 of the Terrorism Act 2006, Max Hill QC, the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, prepared a report on the operation in 2017 of the Terrorism Act 2000, the Terrorism Act 2006, the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011, and The Terrorist Asset Freezing etc. Act 2010, which was laid before the House on 10 October 2018.

I am grateful to Mr Hill for his report and have carefully considered the recommendations and observations included in them. I am today laying before the House the Government's response to the report (CP88). Copies of which will be available in the Vote Office and it will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS1500]

JUSTICE

Divorce Law Reform

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I am pleased to lay before Parliament "Reducing Family Conflict: Reform of the Legal

Requirements for Divorce", the Government response to the consultation on reform of this important area of family law. The full public consultation ran from 15 September to 10 December last year and sought views on the Government's proposals to revise the process for obtaining a divorce to minimise acrimony during the legal process and reduce the potential for ongoing conflict afterwards. I am grateful for the insight and experience shared by people in providing evidence of the real-life difficulties that can arise from the current law, particularly how it incentivises focusing on the past to make allegations that can unnecessarily pit one spouse against the other. That is why we are proposing to remove the legal requirement to make allegations about spousal conduct or to have lived separately for up to five years.

Families are the bedrock of society, and marriage has long proved its vital importance to family stability. The Government will always support marriage, and we want to ensure that the system as far as possible supports couples to remain married. In revising the legal process for divorce, we have also sought to maximise the opportunity for couples to reconcile if they can, by introducing a minimum period before the court grants the decree of divorce. Divorce should continue to be a considered decision. We heard from respondents to the consultation that couples often feel divorced when the court grants the provisional decree of divorce. Beginning the minimum period before this point is therefore key to allowing for both meaningful reflection and an opportunity to turn back.

When, sadly, a marriage or civil partnership has irretrievably broken down, continuing in it can be damaging for the couple and for any children they have, as well as undermining the institution of marriage itself which can work only if both parties are committed to it. It is vital that the law recognises this and, where divorce is inevitable, allows people to move on in as constructive a way as possible. The ability to have a positive rapport and co-operate after separation is particularly crucial for parents, as children's outcomes are improved by co-operative parenting. Removing from the legal process for divorce those elements which can fuel long-lasting conflict between parents will therefore support better outcomes for children. Where, despite reflection, divorce cannot be avoided the law should do all it can to reduce conflict and encourage good relations as couples move on to reach agreement about practical arrangements for the future.

The Government will therefore bring forward proposals to deal with the legal aspects of divorce or civil partnership dissolution as sensitively as possible. Divorce is of great social significance but for those involved it is also an intensely personal matter. Unfortunately, it affects the lives of too many families. The current law does little to reduce conflict when divorce occurs. It urgently needs reform to encourage a more conciliatory and constructive approach to undoing a marriage, and to ensure better outcomes for all those involved, and especially for children.

The Government have today set out their proposals for reform. We intend to bring forward legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

[HCWS1501]

Written Statements

Wednesday 10 April 2019

TREASURY

Public Sector Exit Payment Cap

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):

Today, I have launched a consultation on the draft regulations to implement the public sector exit payment cap. The Government introduced powers to cap exit payments in the public sector at £95,000 in the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015.

Public servants deserve to be properly rewarded for the vital work they do. That is why the Government announced the biggest public sector pay rise in 10 years last summer, with most going to the lowest paid nurses, teachers and police officers.

However, the way we reward public servants must be proportionate and fair to taxpayers. The very high exit payments we have seen granted to some highly-paid public sector employees in recent years clearly breach these principles. It is right that the Government acts on this to give taxpayers the confidence their money is being spent properly.

This consultation sets out the proposed method for implementing the cap, including which bodies should be in scope.

The consultation can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/restricting-exit-payments-in-the-public-sector>.

[HCWS1503]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces' Standards and Values

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):

The Ministry of Defence and our armed forces expect the highest standards from our personnel. The vast majority not only meet, but exceed these standards on a daily basis in all manner of challenging situations, wherever they are deployed, reinforcing the values on which we pride ourselves. However, it is clear that in a number of cases the standards and values we expect are not being met.

The Ministry of Defence and our armed forces are absolutely clear that there is no place for sexual offending or sexual harassment across the services. Inappropriate behaviour is unacceptable and it stands in stark contrast with everything the armed forces represent. Anyone found to have committed a sexual offence will be dealt with appropriately and will face the full force of the law. To ensure our service personnel are adhering to the highest standards, I have commissioned Air Marshal Michael Wigston, deputy commander for capability at HQ Air Command, to conduct an urgent report into inappropriate behaviour, to include sexual harassment, across the services.

The objectives of the report are threefold: to understand the current evidence regarding inappropriate behaviour across the services; to make recommendations on what can be done to ensure and reassure that the armed

forces are an inclusive and modern employer; and, to identify areas for further action, including potential improvements to controls, processes or policy. The Air Marshal will provide me with a report of his findings and recommendations by mid-May. Once the recommendations have been considered and implementation plans have been agreed, the House will be updated.

[HCWS1504]

TRANSPORT

Rail

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I am updating the House on the east midlands, south eastern and west coast partnership franchise competitions.

I am pleased to inform the House that, following rigorous competition, I intend to award the next east midlands railway franchise to Abellio East Midlands pending successful completion of a standstill period of at least 10 days.

The franchise is due to start on 18 August 2019 and will run for eight years, until 21 August 2027, with an extension of two years callable at my discretion.

Passengers, local authorities, businesses and other stakeholders across the country contributed to a highly demanding and challenging specification for this new franchise. Bidders were invited to demonstrate how they would meet this specification, and I am very pleased that we have agreed a plan with Abellio East Midlands for them to exceed these expectations.

Abellio East Midlands will oversee the introduction of brand-new trains, entirely replacing the existing intercity fleet with more reliable and comfortable trains. Passengers will benefit from an 80% increase in the number of morning peak seats into Nottingham, Lincoln and St Pancras. Passengers will also see faster journey times over long distances, with a new express service from Corby through Luton into London.

The east midlands railway will be at the forefront of the Government's commitment to deliver a cleaner, greener rail network. Abellio East Midlands will trial hydrogen fuel cell trains on the midland main line and will run zero-carbon pilots at six stations along the route.

The new franchise will also deliver a fairer deal for passengers. Over £17 million will be invested in improving station facilities across the route, including to deliver accessibility improvements. Abellio East Midlands will also deliver an additional 916 extra car park spaces and 1,050 cycle spaces.

Passengers will benefit from the provision of free wi-fi throughout the franchise, both on trains and at stations, and a significant uplift to the current ticketing system, with the introduction of smart, flexible ticketing options, including to provide better value for those who travel regularly but less than five days a week, as well as improved ticket-buying facilities and nine newly staffed stations.

The new east midlands railway franchise will also introduce enhanced delay repay compensation, with passengers able to claim compensation if their train is more than 15 minutes late.

We look forward to working closely with Abellio East Midlands to ensure they deliver the high-quality services that passengers expect and deserve from the railway and the east midlands railway franchise.

With regards to the south eastern franchise competition, I am also today updating the House that my Department is negotiating a short-term extension to the current franchise agreement with Govia while we make a decision on the competition. This will ensure continuity of services for passengers until 10 November 2019, with an option to extend the agreement further to April 2020.

We are due to award the west coast partnership in June.

Alongside this, there is a root-and-branch review of the railway underway, independently chaired by Keith Williams. This will make ambitious recommendations before the end of the year to reform the structure of the whole rail industry to prioritise passengers' and taxpayers' interests.

The next east midlands railway franchise and the ongoing competitions include significant improvements for passengers and steps to bring track and train closer together. From 2020, we will begin to roll out further reforms, advised by the rail review, across the country. We will be guided by the approaches that deliver benefits to passengers and other rail users soonest. Awarding the new east midlands railway franchise is part of that strategy.

[HCWS1502]

Written Statements

Thursday 11 April 2019

CABINET OFFICE

Public Appointments Order in Council

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Today I wish to inform the House that the Privy Council has made a revised Order in Council that makes provision for an independent commissioner to monitor the procedures adopted by appointing authorities when making appointments to public bodies. This revokes the Order made in November 2017 and provides an amended schedule of bodies and offices to be regulated by the commissioner. Regulation by the commissioner in accordance with the governance code on public appointments is an important part of ensuring that those appointments made by Government Ministers which are subject to regulation are made in an open, fair and transparent manner.

The revised Order in Council has been gazetted in the Edinburgh, London and Belfast gazettes and published on the website of the Privy Council Office. Changes to the schedule reflect where public bodies have been created, renamed, dissolved or subject to machinery of Government changes since November 2017. A copy of the Order in Council has been placed in the Libraries of both houses.

We have only added bodies to the schedule where they legally exist as of the date of the Order being made. This means that two bodies previously announced by the Government have not been included in this revised order: the Holocaust Memorial Centre Ltd and the Trade Remedies Authority (TRA). The former is soon to be established as an arm's length body of Government. At that point, it can be treated as a regulated body by notification to the commissioner under section 2 (3) of the Order in Council. The TRA has already been notified to the commissioner under this section who has confirmed that it will be treated as a regulated body as soon as it exists. In the meantime, interim appointments to the TRA have been made in line with the governance code and principles on public appointments. The TRA will be the only arm's length body of the Department for International Trade and will appear as such on the schedule of the Order in Council when it is next updated.

We will conduct a comprehensive review of the Order in Council later this year to ensure consistency in the schedule and the types of bodies included. This will provide a further opportunity to add the two bodies above and any other newly created bodies to the schedule as appropriate, and the subsequent Order in Council will be published. Thereafter, we intend to undertake an annual refresh of the Order.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-04-11/HCWS1510/>.

[HCWS1510]

TREASURY

Ministerial Equivalence and Exemption Directions in Financial Services: EU and EEA

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Equivalence Determinations for Financial Services and Miscellaneous Provisions (Amendment etc) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I. 2019/541), includes a power for Ministers, for up to twelve months after exit day, to make equivalence directions and exemption directions for the European Union and EEA member states.

I have today laid before Parliament ministerial directions which exercise the power in four specific areas, to help ensure that the UK will have a functioning regulatory regime for financial services in all scenarios.

The first direction determines that the EU-adopted international financial reporting standards are equivalent to UK accounting standards and can continue to be used, for example, to prepare financial statements for requirements under the transparency directive, and to prepare a prospectus under the prospectus directive. This delivers on a commitment made by the Government in November 2018.

HM Treasury, the European Union and the EEA European Free Trade Association countries have decided to provide exemptions for central banks and certain public bodies under certain prudential regulations in the area of financial services in the event that the United Kingdom leaves the European Union without an agreement. Therefore, directions have been made exempting these EU and EEA bodies from certain requirements under UK law in force after exit.

These measures are important for avoiding disruption to the financial services sector, and the businesses and individuals relying on it, in the event that the United Kingdom withdraws from the European Union without an agreement.

Copies of the directions are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office and will be published alongside the Equivalence Determinations for Financial Services and Miscellaneous Provisions (Amendment etc) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 on Legislation.gov.uk.

[HCWS1512]

Counter-Terrorism Asset Freezing Regime: 1 October to 31 December 2018

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (TAF 2010), the Treasury is required to prepare a quarterly report regarding its exercise of the powers conferred on it by part 1 of TAF 2010. This written statement satisfies that requirement for the period 1 October 2018 to 31 December 2018.

This report also covers the UK's implementation of the UN's ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaeda asset-freezing regime (ISIL-AQ), and the operation of the EU's asset-freezing regime under EU regulation (EC) 2580/2001 concerning external terrorist threats to the EU (also referred to as the CP 931 regime).

Under the ISIL-AQ asset-freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury, through the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the ISIL (Daesh) and Al-Qaida (Asset-Freezing) Regulations 2011.

Under EU regulation 2580/2001, the EU has responsibility for designations and OFSI has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under part 1 of TAFAs 2010.

A new EU asset-freezing regime under EU regulation (2016/1686) was implemented on 22 September 2016. This permits the EU to make autonomous al-Qaeda and ISIL (Daesh) listings. One new designation under the regime was made during this quarter, and is recorded in the fifth column of the annexed table entitled “New Designations in this Quarter”.

The Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 will help ensure that UK counter-terrorist sanctions powers remain a useful tool for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to consider utilising, while also meeting the UK’s international obligations.

Under the Act, a designation could be made where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that the person or group is or has been involved in a defined terrorist activity and that designation is appropriate. This approach is in line with the UK’s current approach under UN and EU sanctions and would be balanced by procedural protections such as the ability of designated persons to challenge the Government in court.

The annexed tables set out the key asset-freezing activity in the UK during the quarter.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-04-11/HCWS1509/>.

[HCWS1509]

DEFENCE

Service Complaints Ombudsman: Annual Report 2018

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to lay before Parliament today the service complaints ombudsman’s annual report for 2018 on the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service complaints system.

This report is published by Nicola Williams and covers the third year of operation of the reformed service complaints system and the work of her office in 2018.

The findings of the report and the new recommendations made will now be fully considered by the Ministry of Defence, and a formal response to the ombudsman will follow once that work is complete.

[HCWS1507]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Times/Sunday Times

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): On 10 January 2019, News UK submitted an application to vary certain conditions put in place in 1981 by the then Secretary of State for Trade.

The changes proposed by News UK would allow The Times and The Sunday Times to share journalistic resources, subject to the agreement of each newspaper’s editor. The application proposed no other changes to the 1981 conditions. As set out in the invitation to comment which my department published on 18 January 2019, this was treated as an application by News UK to replace the 1981 conditions with new undertakings in accordance with schedule 18 to the Communications Act 2003.

I have considered this application in my quasi-judicial role regarding media merger cases. Having considered News UK’s application and the representations made to the invitation to comment, I have concluded that there has been a material change in circumstances since 1981 that warrants me considering the application. I have also concluded that the change of circumstances justifies the variation, as the effect of News UK’s proposed changes would not, in my view, materially impact on the public interest considerations contained in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002.

I am, therefore, minded to accept News UK’s application. However, in considering the proposed new undertakings as a whole, I have noted that the existing governance arrangements—agreed in 1981—lack clarity and certainty over roles and responsibilities. Before agreeing the application I am therefore of the view that these arrangements need to be suitably updated and enhanced to better reflect current corporate best practice.

I have asked DCMS officials to discuss these issues with News UK and to consider new proposals from News UK to update the proposed undertakings to address my concerns. I will update the House in due course on these discussions. Should News UK be able to offer revised undertakings which meet my concerns, I will, as required in legislation, consult on the final form of the undertakings before deciding whether or not to accept them.

[HCWS1505]

EDUCATION

Teacher Training Skills Test

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I would like to set out for the House some actions my Department is taking to resolve an error we have identified in the marking scheme of one of the professional skills tests for prospective teachers.

The skills tests assess the core skills that teachers need to fulfil their professional role in schools. This is to ensure all teachers are competent in numeracy and literacy, regardless of their specialism.

All current and prospective trainee teachers must pass the skills tests in numeracy and literacy before they can be recommended for the award of qualified teacher status (QTS). Trainee teachers must pass the skills tests before they start their course of initial teacher training.

Since February 2018, candidates have been able to take unlimited test attempts, with the first three attempts offered free of charge.

The design of the skills tests is the responsibility of the Standards and Testing Agency (STA). The agency recently reviewed all marking schemes in operation for the skills tests and discovered an error in one test. This test was immediately taken out of use and the STA have confirmed that there are no errors in the remaining marking schemes that are in operation.

The error applies to a marking scheme for one of the literacy skills tests and has resulted in a small number of candidates failing their literacy test when they should have passed. The incorrect marking scheme for this test has been in operation for at least 10 years. We know that just over 200 candidates were affected by the error between September 2017 and November 2018, approximately 150 of whom went on to pass their literacy test.

We will offer a payment to compensate candidates affected for any expenses they may have incurred in having to retake the test. My Department will make best endeavours to contact candidates affected by the marking scheme error. Any candidates who think they may have been affected can also contact the skills test helpline by emailing support@sta.psonline.com.

It is regrettable that this error has prevented some candidates from progressing their applications to teacher training. My Department is taking swift action to make sure that those affected are supported to progress their applications.

The chief executive of the STA has assured me that there are no remaining marking scheme errors and that the schemes will be quality assured on a regular basis to prevent further errors.

[HCWS1511]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council takes place in Luxembourg on 15 April.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for agriculture will be on the post-2020 common agricultural policy (CAP) reform package. Ministers will exchange views on the green architecture elements in the regulation on CAP strategic plans.

Council will also exchange views on the agricultural aspects of the Commission's strategic long-term vision for a climate neutral economy, the market situation, and the taskforce in rural Africa, an expert group set up by the European Commission.

There are currently four items scheduled for discussion under "any other business":

information from the presidency on research and agriculture.
information from the Commission on the declaration on smart and sustainable digital future for European agriculture and rural areas.

information from the Slovakian delegation on the renewable energy directive post-2020.

information from the Netherlands delegation on the EU Action against deforestation and forest degradation.

[HCWS1506]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU Settlement Scheme: Emails

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The EU settlement scheme is an integral part of protecting the rights of EU citizens who have made their homes here in the UK, giving them an easy way of demonstrating their status in this country so that in years to come we do not find ourselves in a position where people have issues making clear the rights that they have. The scheme, which is free of charge, is performing well and over 400,000 EU citizens have already applied, with over 50,000 applications received on the opening weekend.

The Home Office receives a large number of inquiries in relation to the scheme. When responding to generic enquiries, responses are sent in batches. The process for this is such that recipients would not normally be able to see the other email addresses. Regrettably, it has come to my attention that on Sunday 7 April three emails were sent that did not follow the appropriate procedure and 240 email addresses were made visible to other recipients. No other personal data was included in the communication.

We have written to all individuals who received this email to apologise. The departmental data protection officer has been informed and the Department has voluntarily notified the Information Commissioner's Office of the incident. An internal review is also underway to determine the details of what happened and the lessons that need to be learned.

The Home Office takes its data protection responsibilities very seriously and is committed to the continued improvement of its performance against the UK's high data protection standards. As a Department we have been taking steps to ensure we have the culture, processes and systems in place to treat the public's personal data appropriately.

As a further immediate step we have put in place strict controls on the use of bulk emails when communicating with members of the public to ensure this does not happen again as lessons are learned. An independent review of the Department's compliance with its data protection obligations has also been commissioned which will be led by non-executive director Sue Langley and will report in due course.

[HCWS1508]

Written Statements

Tuesday 23 April 2019

TREASURY

Informal ECOFIN 5-6 April

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): An informal meeting of Economic and Financial Affairs (ECOFIN) Ministers was held in Bucharest on 5-6 April 2019. Ministers discussed the following:

Working lunch—multiannual financial framework

Ministers discussed the multiannual finance framework in the context of the European semester and financing of the EU budget.

Working session I

Central bank governors joined for the first working session.

a) Institutional cycle priorities

Following a presentation from Bruegel, Ministers and central bank governors discussed priorities for the next EU institutional cycle.

b) Capital markets union

Ministers and central bank governors then discussed the way forward for the capital markets union.

Working session II

a) Labour mobility in the EU

Following a presentation from the Centre for European Policy Studies, Ministers discussed the macroeconomic and fiscal impact of labour mobility in the EU.

b) Taxation and economic growth

Ministers discussed the role of taxation in supporting EU economic growth.

c) Preparation of the April G20 and IMF meetings

Ministers approved the EU terms of reference for the G20 meeting and international monetary and financial committee statement, ahead of the Spring meetings of the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund in Washington DC.

[HCWS1515]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Private Rented Sector

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): You will have seen that last week I announced reforms to the legislative framework governing how private tenancies can be ended in England to improve security in the private rented sector for both tenants and landlords. This announcement followed my Department's recent consultation on "Overcoming the Barriers to Longer Tenancies". I also published the Government's response to this consultation.

The private rented sector has changed dramatically in the last 20 years, and the sector needs to keep pace with these changes. The number of people who live in the private rented sector has doubled, and it is home to more families with children and older people. These households need stability and security in their home.

The current legislative framework leaves tenants feeling insecure. They can be asked to leave their homes, with as little as two months notice, without the landlord

providing any reason, using eviction proceedings under section 21 of the Housing Act 1988. This sense of insecurity can profoundly affect the ability of renters to plan for the future, to manage their finances or to put down roots in their local communities.

The Government intend to establish a fairer system for both tenants and landlords by legislating to repeal section 21 of the Housing Act 1988. Bringing an end to so-called "no fault evictions", would mean that a tenant cannot be forced to leave their home unless the landlord can prove a specified ground, such as rent arrears or breach of tenancy agreement. It would provide tenants with more stability and protect them from having to make frequent and short notice moves. It would also empower tenants to challenge their landlord about poor property standards where this occurs, without the worry of being evicted as a result of making a complaint.

The private rented sector must also remain a stable and secure market for landlords to continue to invest in. The legislation I intend to introduce will include measures that provide landlords with additional safeguards to successfully manage their properties. We will strengthen the existing grounds for eviction available to landlords under section 8 of the Housing Act 1988. This will allow the landlord to regain their property when they want to sell it or move into it themselves.

It is important that landlords can have confidence that the court system works for them in instances when there is no other option but to seek possession of their property through the courts. That is why this announcement includes improvements to court processes, to make it quicker and smoother for landlords to regain their properties when they have a legitimate reason to do so.

Removing no-fault evictions is a significant step. This announcement is the start of a longer process to introduce these reforms. We want to build a consensus on a package of reforms to improve security for tenants while providing landlords with the confidence that they have the tools they need.

We will launch a consultation on the details of a better system that will work for landlords and tenants. The Government will collaborate with and listen to landlords, tenants and others in the private rented sector to develop a new deal for renting. Ministers will also work with other types of housing providers outside of the private rented sector who use these powers and use the consultation to make sure the new system works effectively.

[HCWS1514]

PRIME MINISTER

Business Greenhouse Gas Reporting Guidance and Regulations

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This written statement confirms that responsibility for business greenhouse gas reporting guidance and regulations will transfer from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. This change will be effective immediately.

[HCWS1516]

WORK AND PENSIONS**Office for Nuclear Regulation Corporate Plan**

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Later today I will lay before this House the Office For Nuclear Regulation corporate plan 2019-20. This document will also be published on the ONR website.

I can confirm, in accordance with schedule 7, paragraph 25(3) of the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published documents on the grounds of national security.

[HCWS1513]

Written Statements

Wednesday 24 April 2019

TREASURY

Bilateral Loan for Ireland

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I would like to update Parliament on the loan to Ireland.

In December 2010, the UK agreed to provide a bilateral loan of £3.2 billion as part of a €67.5 billion international assistance package for Ireland. The loan was disbursed in eight tranches. The final tranche was drawn down on 26 September 2013. Ireland has made interest payments on the loan every six months since the first disbursement.

On 15 April, in line with the agreed repayment schedule, HM Treasury received a total payment of £407,843,097.02 from Ireland. This comprises the repayment of £403,370,000 in principal and £4,473,097.02 in accrued interest.

As required under the Loans to Ireland Act 2010, HM Treasury laid a statutory report to Parliament on 1 April covering the period from 1 October to 31 March 2019. The report set out details of future payments up to the final repayment on 26 March 2021. The Government continue to expect the loan to be repaid in full and on time.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/791132/Ireland_loan_statutory_report_April_2019_web.pdf

The next statutory report will cover the period from 1 April to 30 September 2019. HM Treasury will report fully on all repayments received during this period in the report.

[HCWS1519]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Online Pornography: Age Verification

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): On 17 April 2019, my Department announced that age-verification for online pornography will begin on 15 July 2019. This means that commercial providers of online pornography will be required by law to carry out robust age-verification checks on users, to ensure that they are aged 18 or over.

The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) will be responsible for ensuring compliance with this new regulation. Websites that fail to implement age-verification technology face having payment services withdrawn or may be blocked for UK users.

Adult content is currently far too easy for children to access online. The introduction of mandatory age verification is a world-first, and we have taken the time to balance privacy concerns with the need to protect children from inappropriate content. We want the UK to be the safest place in the world to be online, and these new laws will help us achieve this.

We have also listened carefully to privacy concerns and take the issue of data privacy and security extremely seriously. We are clear that age-verification arrangements should only be concerned with verifying age, not identity.

In addition to the requirement for all age-verification providers to comply with General Data Protection Regulation standards, the BBFC has created a voluntary certification scheme, the Age-verification Certificate (AVC), which will assess the data security standards of age-verification providers. We feel that consumers should be able to choose age-verification solutions that meet an even higher privacy standard than is offered by GDPR if they wish to.

The AVC has been developed in co-operation with industry and Government. Certified age-verification solutions which offer these robust data protection conditions will be certified following an independent assessment and will carry the BBFC's new green 'AV' symbol. Details will also be published on the BBFC's age-verification website, ageverificationregulator.com, so consumers can make an informed choice between age-verification providers.

[HCWS1521]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Contingent Liability: Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 and outside the normal course of business, for the Minister concerned to lay a departmental Minute before Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances. The Department should refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the statement.

This Minute relates to the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS), an Executive agency of DEFRA, entering into a commercial arrangement with the Kuwait environment public authority (an authority of the Government of Kuwait) who have asked CEFAS to contract with them to provide a marine environment monitoring information system for Kuwait. This is proposed to be a four-year contract of marine science services for which the Kuwaitis will cover all CEFAS's costs of around £40 million.

The Kuwait Government wish to enhance their national environmental management capability to world leading standards and are pursuing a strategy of working with the best international government bodies from strategic partner countries. This Kuwaiti Government objective is being delivered under their Environment Monitoring Information System Kuwait (eMISK) programme which spans marine, waste, terrestrial, air and subsurface environments. The Kuwait environment public authority have asked CEFAS to tender for the marine programme and this is supported by both countries at ministerial level, as set out in the inter-government declarations of the joint steering group.

The benefits of this work to both Governments are the significant contributions it will make to the long-term health of the Gulf marine environment. It will also engage the next generation of Kuwaiti scientists in bilateral co-operation with the UK, maintain and develop CEFAS's international capability, and position both Kuwait and the UK in a leading position in this area of science.

The contractual arrangements between the two parties follow standard Kuwaiti national commercial terms and conditions and include two contingent liabilities relating to a performance bond and liquidated damages claims. These liabilities are limited to a maximum of 20% of the £40 million contract value. Professional indemnity insurance will be purchased, using contract funds, to protect the Department against these risks leaving a residual excess value of no more than £250,000. Only uninsurable risks remain which would be due to late delivery or third-party claims.

CEFAS and DEFRA have considered the risks of this indemnity and they believe the likelihood of such indemnities being called upon is very low. Agency or departmental budgets are expected to fund any liability call. If such budgets are insufficient then any payment would be sought through the normal supply procedure.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle.

If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days, beginning on the date on which this Minute was laid before Parliament, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament, final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS1517]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Temporary Transitional Migration Arrangements: UK and Switzerland

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The UK and Switzerland have reached an agreement on temporary transitional migration arrangements for workers in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal. These would apply until December 2020.

This agreement is further to the Swiss Government's announcement in February 2019 that in a no-deal scenario they would create a specific quota of 3,500 work permits for 2019 for UK workers. As part of the transitional migration agreement, Switzerland has also agreed that UK nationals would not need to meet rules regarding skill level, national preference and economic interest which normally apply to third country nationals during the period covered by the agreement. The agreement also includes protections for frontier workers not covered by the UK-Swiss citizens' rights agreement which would allow them to continue cross-border work until 31 December 2020.

The UK has agreed to provide arrangements for Swiss nationals who wish to work in the UK which are at least as favourable as those offered to UK nationals in Switzerland. In the event of no deal, and following the ending of free movement, Swiss and EEA nationals arriving in the UK for the first time would be eligible for European temporary leave to remain. This would allow them to work in the UK for three years.

This agreement will be subject to ratification processes in both states, and will be signed and published in due course. The UK and Switzerland will continue to work

closely together on implementing the agreement and will discuss the arrangements which will apply from the end of 2020 in due course.

Further information about the agreement can be found on gov.uk.

[HCWS1520]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU's European Travel Information Authorisation System

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government have decided to opt in to the aspect of the draft regulation that establishes the conditions for the access of the European travel information authorisation system (ETIAS) to the European criminal records information system (ECRIS-TCN), and has decided not to opt out of the aspect of the draft regulation that establishes the conditions for the access of ETIAS to the second Schengen information system (SIS II).

ETIAS is the EU's travel authorisation system that visa-exempt visitors (third country nationals and stateless persons) will have to apply to prior to their entry in the Schengen area. The UK does not participate in ETIAS as it forms part of Schengen border legislation that the UK cannot participate in, but the UK fully supports the EU's efforts to strengthen its external borders of which this forms part.

Under this proposal, an ETIAS central unit will access EU information technology systems to support their considerations, specifically ECRIS-TCN and SIS II. Once implemented, the regulation will allow the EU to revoke a grant of admission to a third country national if a relevant alert is identified from data the UK has uploaded to the ECRIS-TCN or SIS II databases. The European Commission has been working towards 2021 as the date from which ETIAS would become operational, but the date might be extended to 2023.

Whilst there are advantages to the EU from ETIAS having access to UK's data, there are no obvious operational or public protection benefits for the UK given it involves the provision of data to a scheme that the UK does not participate in. However, a significant argument in favour of participating is to prevent the UK's non-participation from giving rise to issues around UK access to SIS II or ECRIS-TCN in future.

Until the UK leaves the EU we remain a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK's opt-in to EU legislation on a case by case basis, with a view to maximising the UK's efforts to collaborate with the EU on a security partnership once the UK leaves the EU, including on SIS II and ECRIS-TCN.

[HCWS1518]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Period Poverty: Government Response

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): I wish to update the House on the activity that is taking place to end period poverty and ensure that every woman and girl in our society can access the menstrual products they need.

This is a complex issue and its causes are not restricted to poverty. Charities and businesses are leading impressive initiatives around the country to change old-fashioned, uninformed attitudes to menstruation and break down taboos. Many organisations and businesses are exhibiting a will to act to tackle this issue by promoting awareness and making products available to their staff and visitors. We have been consulting with these organisations and are also writing to all Members of this House to ask for their help in identifying good practice and further partners around the UK.

On 4 March this year I announced that the Government would establish a new joint taskforce on period poverty in the UK. This initiative recognises the importance of tackling period poverty for the dignity and empowerment of women and girls. Up to £250,000 has been committed in seed funding to support the work.

The taskforce will launch in June and will bring together a range of different organisations working on period poverty from across the public, private and third sectors. Details on the remit and membership of the taskforce will be announced in due course. Its objective will be to join up learning and ideas and develop a comprehensive, sustainable response. By linking different sectors, it will build on the range of diverse initiatives that already exist, promoting those which are delivering impact, and helping them to grow and become sustainable.

We need much better evidence and understanding of how period poverty affects different groups in our society. Therefore, improving the data in this area will be an issue the taskforce will tackle as a priority. Addressing stigma will be another main area of focus, given the shame and taboo that still exists around periods. The taskforce will consider the role of education, communications and role models in shifting social attitudes. The Government's new relationships, sex and health education, published earlier this year, will ensure every pupil learns about leading healthy lives, including menstrual wellbeing, as part of a well-rounded education on mental and physical health.

By bringing together different parts of Government, the taskforce will promote a coherent, sustainable approach. In the spring statement of 13 March 2019, the Government announced that they will support a new scheme to provide free sanitary products in secondary schools and

further education colleges. On 16 April, it was further announced that free period products will be offered to girls in all primary schools in England from early next year.

Extending the programme to all primary schools follows feedback from teachers, students and parents. The Department for Education is now working with key stakeholders in the public and private sector to roll out the programme in a cost-effective manner that supports girls and young women across the country.

In March 2019 the NHS in England announced that it will offer free period products to every hospital patient who needs them and today the Home Office has announced that it is set to change the law to ensure that all menstruating women, and others with personal health and hygiene needs, are treated with dignity whilst in custody. Police forces will provide menstrual products to female detainees if required, free of charge. The intended changes will be brought into effect when the revised Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) codes of practice have been laid in Parliament.

In recognition of the global nature of the issue, the Department for International Development is leading a new global campaign of action to end period poverty by 2030. Across low and middle-income countries it is estimated that over half of all women and girls are forced to use homemade products, rags, grass or paper to manage their periods. In many countries there is a lack of information and appropriate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. I announced on International Women's Day that this campaign will kick-start with an allocation of up to £2 million for small and medium charities working on period poverty in DFID priority countries. We are building on existing UK aid programmes that are enabling women and girls around the world to access sanitary products, facilities and knowledge about their periods, including through the Girls' Education Challenge, Amplify Change and DFID's water and sanitation, reproductive health and research programmes.

I would like to pay tribute to all those working so tirelessly to tackle period poverty and shame both in the UK and around the world. We look forward to helping their good work scale and reach every woman and girl in need.

[HCWS1522]

Written Statements

Thursday 25 April 2019

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND CABINET OFFICE

Contingent Liability

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present to Parliament a minute giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

It is the intention of the Government to respect the 2016 referendum result and leave the European Union with a deal as soon as possible. However, there is now a legal need to prepare for possible participation in the European parliamentary elections, although it remains the Government's intention for the UK to leave the European Union with a deal before 22 May, so that we do not need to participate in these elections.

It is normal practice for the Government to indemnify returning officers in this way to ensure their personal liabilities are covered. The Cabinet Office previously provided an indemnity in 2014 for the European parliamentary elections. The Cabinet Office also provided an indemnity for the 2015 and 2017 UK parliamentary general elections, the 2016 Police and Crime Commissioner elections, and the recall of MPs petitions. HM Treasury has approved the indemnity in principle.

Given the highly unusual circumstances, as I hope hon. Members will appreciate, it has not been possible for the indemnity to be laid in Parliament for 14 sitting days before coming into effect.

On this basis, I have today laid a minute setting out the Cabinet Office's proposal to indemnify returning officers for the European parliamentary elections on 23 May 2019 against uninsured claims that arise out of the conduct of their duties. We will also provide a certificate confirming that we will bear any employee liabilities of the returning officer which would otherwise be covered by insurance procured under the Employers' Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969.

[HCWS1525]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

The UK and the EU have agreed an extension to Article 50, until 31 October 2019, which is legally binding in EU and international law. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full Member State, and continue to act in good faith.

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) in Luxembourg on 9 April 2019. A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union's website at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2019/04/09/>

Multiannual Financial Framework 2021 - 2027

The presidency presented a progress report outlining the latest developments on negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) - related sectorial proposals. The presidency also highlighted that common understandings have been reached with the European Parliament (EP) on ten sectorial files. Cohesion and Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) continued to be the central pillars of the next MFF. However, the Commission noted that the proposed cuts to Cohesion and CAP were unavoidable due to the loss of the UK's contribution.

The Cohesion fund aims to reduce economic and social disparities and to promote sustainable development. Ministers discussed how the Cohesion policy and CAP can best support EU priorities. Some member states criticised the proposed cuts and supported maintaining funding for transition regions (where GDP per capita falls between 75% and 90% of the EU average). Other member states advocated for a stronger link of funds to the EU's core business, such as tackling climate change, rule of law and migration. There was general agreement that cohesion funding should be predictable, whilst allowing for a level of flexibility to manage unexpected events.

Ministers agreed that the funding priorities should be modernisation of the agricultural industry and securing support for young farmers. Some member states proposed a set target for expenditure contributing to climate change goals, while incentivising farmers to meet the goals.

Conclusions on the Reflection Paper "Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030"

Ministers adopted conclusions on the EU's implementation of the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are targets in 17 priority areas agreed between the members of the UN in 2015, with the aim of making the world a more sustainable place to live. The Council agreed that the SDGs are a key aspect of the EU's Strategic Agenda 2019-2024, making clear reference to "leave no one behind".

The Council's conclusions recognised the importance of the SDGs for the EU, stated that the UN 2030 Agenda was an overarching priority for the EU and stressed that it was in the EU's interest to play a leading role in its implementation, recognising that delivery of this agenda is necessarily a shared responsibility between all stakeholders.

Values of the Union - Hungary | Article 7(1) TEU Reasoned Proposal

The Commission provided an update on the most recent developments regarding EU values in Hungary. Ministers discussed values of the Union in relation to Hungary.

Rule of Law in Poland | Article 7(1) TEU Reasoned Proposal

The Commission provided an update on the rule of law cases in Poland before the European Court of Justice, and its most recent infraction notification against Poland's disciplinary procedures for ordinary judges. The presidency stated that the Council would return to the issue.

[HCWS1523]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prüm Access: Switzerland and Liechtenstein

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The Prüm framework lays down provisions stating that EU member states grant each other access to their automated DNA analysis files, automated fingerprint identification systems (AFIS), and vehicle registration data. The European Commission has proposed Council decisions that, if adopted, would extend participation in the key data-sharing elements of Prüm to Switzerland and Liechtenstein as third countries.

The UK is fully supportive of data sharing to assist the investigation, prosecution and prevention of serious crime and terrorism. It is the Government's position that data-sharing regimes between countries, with appropriate safeguards, enhance the safety and wellbeing of citizens of and visitors to those countries. The UK has opted in to the Prüm decisions and remains committed to fully implementing Prüm in the UK.

The UK is also fully supportive of extending the law enforcement access to Prüm to Switzerland and Liechtenstein. The UK has no current biometrics data-sharing agreements in place with Switzerland or Liechtenstein. These states are close partners and enabling further data sharing with them will enhance both their security and ours.

The Government have therefore decided to opt in to the EU Council decisions authorising the signing and conclusion of agreements between the EU and Switzerland, and the EU and Liechtenstein, to enable their access as third countries to Prüm, stepping up cross-border co-operation, particularly in combating terrorism and cross-border crime.

The UK Government will continue to consider the application of the UK's opt-in to EU legislation on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising the UK's efforts to collaborate with the EU on a security partnership once the UK leaves the EU. The UK is committed to fully implementing Prüm and continuing the international exchange of biometric data with the EU as part of this future security partnership.

[HCWS1524]

Petitions

Tuesday 9 April 2019

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Closure of Oldham Post Office

The petition of residents of Oldham,

Declares that we object to the proposal by Post Office Ltd to close our main Crown post office in Oldham town centre and relocate it to WH Smith; further that the proposed closure from its High Street location and relocation to WH Smith in Spindles/Town Square shopping centre is a nonsense as evident to anyone who uses the post office; further that the post office is a busy branch and well used; further that there is no public interest in closing it; further that even if some services will be relocated, services, staff and our high street will be compromised; further that not only will we lose a visible institution on our high street, the experience of post office services in WH Smiths tells us that it will be smaller, queues will be longer and services will be reduced.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Post Office Ltd to think again about the decision to close Oldham Post Office and to ensure that the consultation is genuine with the real concerns we have fully taken on board.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Jim McMahon, *Official Report*, 27 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 459.]

[P002430]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, (Kelly Tolhurst)

The Government value and recognise the important role that the Post Office plays in Oldham and other communities across the UK. This is why we committed in our 2017 manifesto to safeguarding the Post Office network and protect existing rural services. Since 2010, the number of branches in the network has been at its most stable for decades, at over 11,500.

While the Post Office is publicly owned, it is a commercial business. The Government set the strategic direction for the Post Office—to maintain a national network accessible to all and to do so more sustainably for the taxpayer—and allows the company the commercial freedom to deliver this strategy as an independent business. The management of the network and decisions on franchising are operational responsibilities for the Post Office. Operational decisions are made by Post Office Limited's CEO and executive team, scrutinised by the Board and accountable to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) for the overall performance of the business.

This strategy backed by Government investment of over £2 billion since 2010 has delivered unprecedented stability to the network. While we understand that changes to post office services can be a cause of concerns to some local residents of Oldham, the Post Office's proposal to franchise Crown branches is part of its plans to ensure a sustainable network in the face of

unprecedented challenges on the high street and changes in consumer behaviour. The Post Office must constantly evolve and modernise the network to meet customers' needs with sustainable branches. While Crown branches are well used, the directly managed network was operating at a loss of £46 million in 2012 and franchising has been instrumental in removing those losses.

Franchising will help retain post office services on our local high streets throughout the country whilst bringing further investment and modernisation in branches and increasing convenience for consumers with extended opening hours and Sunday opening in most cases. Franchising is not a closure or redundancy programme and it does not mean that the Post Office is moving from public ownership. The community in Oldham, and indeed other communities across the UK, are not losing their post office. This will be relocated to nearby WHSmith branch, making services more accessible to customers.

WHSmith has been successfully operating post offices within its stores since 2017 and currently runs over 130 branches, demonstrating its proficiency to run the branch in Oldham. The franchise arrangement will bring extended opening hours and seven-day trading for customers offering a wide range of products and services with the exception of a cash machine. Although the existing ATM will not transfer, customers can withdraw money from the post office counter as part of the agreement with all the major high street banks. The nearest alternative external cash machine at a post office branch can be found approximately 1.4 miles away at Lees Road post office, 266 Lees Road, Oldham, OL4 1PA.

Regarding the Post Office's consultation in Oldham, this ran for six weeks and closed on the 27 February. This process sought to inform, and gather views from, opinion formers and local stakeholders of the proposed changes to the network and to allow the public to inform the Post Office's plans for the new branch. The Post Office also runs a customer forum to allow the public to speak to them directly. This process in line with the Post Office's code of practice on changes to the network agreed with Citizens Advice. A recent review by Citizens Advice reported that the Post Office consultation process is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed in most cases, demonstrating that the Post Office listens to the community.

The decision resulting from the consultation will not be promulgated until after the response to the petition has been filed. However, once all the responses from the consultation have been reviewed and all feedback considered then the community, staff, concerned parties and individuals will be advised of the decision.

Community Energy Savings Programme: Lowestoft

The petition of residents of Lowestoft, Suffolk,

Declares that the Community Energy Savings Programme is causing us significant suffering: accruing detriments to our finances, health and wellbeing, and private and family lives; further that residents of Lowestoft particular grievance is with the standard of external wall insulation installed to certain properties as part of the Community Energy Saving Programme 2009 - 2012 (CESP); further that the CESP was a Government policy, set down in legislation, designed to improve

domestic energy efficiency standards in the most deprived geographical areas across Great Britain; further notes that many vulnerable residents are having to live with the impact on our homes from the premature deterioration of the very poor installations; further notes that there is no evidence of appropriate training certification for the external wall cladding insulation and thus many residents are unable to obtain a valid guarantee/warranty which has affected the value of our homes and at worst has meant homes cannot be sold; further that the GCS Chartered Surveyors who were instructed to comment on the standard and workmanship of the external wall insulation have concluded that the external wall insulations do not meet system designer and BBA specification; further that the GCS Chartered Surveyors found the insulations were installed by MITIE Property Services who did not have approvals in place to install the system at the time; further that many partners are responsible for the failure of this programme including: MITIE Property Services, The Bright Green Lowestoft Organization, Waveney District Council, Suffolk Climate Change Partnership, Climate Energy Limited and npower; further that whilst the project was delivered by a number of partners the main contractors, MITIE, have overall responsibility for ensuring the installation is compliant to the system designer's specifications; and further that the installations were found to fall fault of numerous problems including: incorrect sealing, missing trims, faulty cladding and poor rendering.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to setup a means whereby each house be assessed by an external specialist ECO assessor and obtain redress for their individual issues, compensation for financial losses and have assurance our homes can be insured without penalties.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Peter Aldous, *Official Report*, 12 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 854.]

[P002418]

Observations from the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, (Claire Perry):

Those who had poor installations under the Community Energy Savings Programme (CESP) should seek redress from the installer in charge of the work, in this case MITIE Property Services, which remains a functioning business.

CESP ended in 2012 and since then Government have taken big steps to change the design of policies to reduce the risk of poor installation.

The Energy Company Obligation (ECO) started after CESP and steps were taken to raise standards and improve consumer protection. The Government worked with the British Standards Institute to develop new standards for ECO installations. These went over and above building regulations to drive up quality and are an eligibility requirement of the scheme;

ECO requires that all solid and cavity wall insulation installations are accompanied by a guarantee—something not required under CESP.

The guarantee must: give financial assurance even if the company providing the original guarantee cannot honour it; provide sufficient coverage—at least 25 years and the replacement of the measure and any remedial work; and provide a verified quality assurance framework for the installation and the product which are independently verified.

The Government are going beyond the protections introduced under ECO. The Each Home Counts (EHC) review was commissioned in July 2015 and reported in 2016. The review has been a key driver in understanding what we need to change in the market and it identified the need for an independent, all-encompassing mark of quality that consumers can rely upon and trust.

This has led to a new Government endorsed quality scheme, being taken forward by TrustMark. The new scheme was launched last October and sets out a clear code of conduct for registered businesses delivering to households and it will be underpinned by rigorous new technical standards to tackle poor design and installation. These will be published this spring and, going forward, we plan that Government schemes such as ECO will require installers to deliver to these standards.

Petition

Tuesday 23 April 2019

OBSERVATIONS

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Havering, and leaving the European Union

The Humble Petition of Lawrence Webb and the citizens of the London Borough of Havering,

Sheweth,

That in 1975 the British people, in a referendum, agreed to remain members of a Common Market, a group of equal and free European Nations trading together without barriers and tariffs. By default, the British people have, without their consent, become citizens of a European State run by a non-elected bureaucratic Commission in Brussels. This foreign power has suborned our legal system and the authority of our Parliament.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House do all in its power to re-establish our sovereign right to rule ourselves in accordance with the freedoms, liberties and rights granted to us and our heirs forever under Magna Carta 1215 and the Bill of Rights 1689, and that we leave the European Union, the Customs Union, the Single Market and that we end Free Movement of People on 29 March, 2019 as set out in law under the European Withdrawal Act 2018.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Andrew Rosindell, Official Report, 27 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 461.]

[P002429]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly):

When 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum, they provided the biggest democratic mandate for any course of action ever directed at a UK Government. It is our firm belief that the British people have made their view clear, and it is now our responsibility to uphold the result of the referendum and leave the EU, with a deal, as soon as possible.

The Government are committed to leaving the EU with a deal that honours the result of the referendum, while also protecting our economy, security and the Union.

On the current terms of the deal that we have negotiated, we would leave the EU, free movement would end and we would instead introduce a new, fair immigration system based on people's skills, rather than their nationality. As well as ending free movement, the deal would end the UK paying vast sums of money to the EU and removes us from the EU budget. In leaving the EU, the jurisdiction of the CJEU will end and all laws in the UK would be passed by our elected officials.

While the House has been unable to accept the Government's deal as it currently stands, the Government maintain that leaving with a deal is the best outcome for the UK. The Prime Minister continues to work closely with colleagues across the House to ensure that the result of the referendum is upheld and the UK leaves the EU in an orderly manner without undue delay.

Petition

Thursday 25 April 2019

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police force funding

The petition of the residents and business owners of Southampton in Hampshire,

Declares that the Police Force is unable to secure sufficient funds from Central Government in order to adequately protect the people of this country from the frightening increase in crime. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the Police have the resources they need to adequately protect the people of this country.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Whitehead, *Official Report*, 5 March 2019; Vol 655, col 929.]

[P002433]

Observations from the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, the right hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd):

The Government have reviewed the changing and increasingly complex demands on the police and have responded by providing total funding of around £14 billion for 2019-20 to policing . This represents an increase of over £970 million compared to 2018/19, including council tax precept. This police settlement will enable police forces, including Hampshire constabulary, to meet the financial pressures they face next year, while continuing to recruit and fill capability gaps, such as the shortage of detectives.

The Hampshire police and crime commissioner will be able to increase his budget to £339 million in 2019/20, an increase of £25 million compared to 2018/19. I welcome his announcement that he will use this funding increase to recruit an additional 200 police officers and 65 police staff investigators.

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 9 April 2019

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homeless People: Death Rates

The following is an extract from Housing, Communities and Local Government Questions on Monday 8 April 2019.

21. [910282] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her answers so far. Clearly, to prevent people from dying on our streets because they are homeless, it is far better to provide them with a home, or to prevent them becoming homeless in the first place. Will she update the House on what is being done in the Housing First trials, so that we can see that innovative scheme rolled out across the country and end homelessness for good?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Housing First pilots are in the Greater Manchester, Greater Birmingham and Greater Liverpool areas, and **£38 million** has been put aside to assist with them. The Mayor of the Greater Birmingham area, Andy Street, phones me regularly to tell me about the progress on the Housing First pilots in the west midlands. The pilot in Liverpool is going quite well too but, sadly, the one in Manchester is not going as well, but I like a bit of competition between the three Mayors and I am sure they will all step up.

[Official Report, 8 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 12.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Wheeler):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

The correct response should have been:

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Housing First pilots are in the Greater Manchester, Greater Birmingham and Greater Liverpool areas, and **£28 million** has been put aside to assist with them.

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 10 April 2019

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Yemen

The following is a Ministerial Correction made by the Minister for Asia and the Pacific on 27 March 2019 to an answer given to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) during an Urgent Question on Yemen.

The following is an extract from the Urgent Question to the Minister for Asia and the Pacific on Tuesday 26 March 2019.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The Government contract the manufacture of UK arms for Saudi Arabia. They contract the issuing of bombs into UK aircraft in the Kingdom. They have RAF soldiers in command centres, and now we learn that we have ground assets in Yemen. So can I ask again, because I do not think the Minister answered the question: if this does not constitute being a member of the coalition, what on earth does? What legal advice have Her Majesty's Government received about potential complicity in war crimes and international humanitarian law abuses, which we could now be liable for?

Mark Field: Will the hon. Gentleman please be assured that there is ongoing legal advice on all the matters to which he referred? I should perhaps also say, to correct the record in that regard, that we do not have our

liaison officers or others in command centres with the Saudis. The liaison is in Saudi; they are there in a training and advisory capacity.

[Official Report, 26 March 2019, Vol. 657, c. 196.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Asia and the Pacific:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle).

The correct response should have been:

Mark Field: Will the hon. Gentleman please be assured that there is ongoing legal advice on all the matters to which he referred? I should perhaps also say, to correct the record in that regard, that we do not have our liaison officers or others in command centres with the Saudis. **We have a very small number of staff working in Saudi headquarters in a liaison capacity only.**

[Official Report, 27 March 2019, Vol. 657, c. 3MC.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Asia and the Pacific:

An error has been identified in the Ministerial Correction I issued to the response I originally gave to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle).

The correct response should have been:

Mark Field: Will the hon. Gentleman please be assured that there is ongoing legal advice on all the matters to which he referred? I should perhaps also say, to correct the record in that regard, that **we have a very small number of staff working in Saudi command centres in a liaison capacity, and our liaison officers are not involved in training.**

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 11 April 2019

JUSTICE

Tax Paid: Reductions

The following is an extract from Treasury questions on Tuesday 9 April 2019.

6. **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): What progress he has made on reducing the total amount of tax that people pay. [910301]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): This Government have made very significant progress in reducing the burden of taxation on the low paid, including by recently increasing the personal allowance to £12,500—thus taking 1.7 million of the lowest paid out of tax all together since 2017.

[Official Report, 9 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 165.]

Letter of correction from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland).

The correct response should have been:

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): This Government have made very significant progress in reducing the burden of taxation on the low paid, including by recently increasing the personal allowance to £12,500—thus taking 1.7 million of the lowest paid out of tax all together **since 2015-16**.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homeless People: Death Rates

The following is a Ministerial Correction made by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), on 9 April 2019 to an answer given to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) during Housing, Communities and Local Government Questions.

The following is an extract from Housing, Communities and Local Government Questions on Monday 8 April 2019.

21. [910282] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her answers so far. Clearly, to prevent people from dying on our streets because they are homeless, it is far better to provide them with a home, or to prevent them becoming homeless in the first place. Will she update the House on what is being done in the Housing First trials, so that we can see that innovative scheme rolled out across the country and end homelessness for good?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Housing First pilots are in the Greater Manchester, Greater Birmingham and Greater Liverpool areas, and **£38 million** has been put aside to assist with them. The Mayor of the Greater Birmingham area, Andy Street, phones me regularly to tell me about the progress on the Housing First pilots in the west midlands. The pilot in Liverpool is going quite well too but, sadly, the one in Manchester is not going as well, but I like a bit of competition between the three Mayors and I am sure they will all step up.

[Official Report, 8 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 12.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Wheeler):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

The correct response should have been:

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Housing First pilots are in the Greater Manchester, Greater Birmingham and Greater Liverpool areas, and **£28 million** has been put aside to assist with them.

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government:

A further error has been identified in the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East.

The correct response should have been:

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Housing First pilots are in the Greater Manchester, Greater Birmingham and Greater Liverpool areas, and **£28 million** has been put aside to assist with them. The Mayor of the Greater Birmingham area, Andy Street, phones me regularly to tell me about the progress on the Housing First pilots in the west midlands. The pilot in **Manchester** is going quite well too but, sadly, the one in **Liverpool** is not going as well, but I like a bit of competition between the three Mayors and I am sure they will all step up.

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 25 April 2019

TRANSPORT

East Midlands Rail Franchise

The following is an extract from the response by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), to an urgent question on Thursday 11 April 2019.

Andrew Jones: Stagecoach is an experienced bidder and fully aware of the franchise competition rules, so it is regrettable that it submitted a non-compliant bid that breached the established rules. In doing so, Stagecoach

is responsible for its own disqualification. Bidders were invited to bid on the basis of a pension deficit recovery mechanism. They knew that at the very start of the process.

[Official Report, 11 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 460.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts).

The correct response should have been:

Andrew Jones: Stagecoach is an experienced bidder and fully aware of the franchise competition rules, so it is regrettable that it submitted a non-compliant bid that breached the established rules. In doing so, Stagecoach is responsible for its own disqualification. Bidders were invited to bid on the basis of a pension deficit recovery mechanism. They knew that **was part** of the process.

